A MERCURY PUBLICATION

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

35¢ AUGUST

Two-Handed Engine
A NOVELET BY
HENRY KUTTNER
AND C. L. MOORE

Inside Straight
a novelet by POUL ANDERSON

Our First Death
by GORDON R. DICKSON

The Strange Children
by ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING

The Last Prophet
by MILDRED CLINGERMAN

EVERY STORY
in this issue NEW

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 9, No. 2 AUGUST

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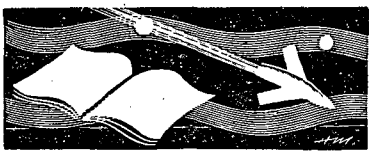

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Henry Kuttner and his wife Catherine have written under seventeen known pseudonyms, and undoubtedly a few more that have so far escaped the researches of scholars; and under the best-known of these, such as Lewis Padgett and Lawrence O'Donnell, they have created a quite undue proportion of the top science fiction of the past fifteen years. In recent times they've abandoned pseudonyms, even the treasured Padgett by-line, to write (always in collaboration) under their own names; and they make their first non-pseudonymous appearance in F&SF with a novelet of future crime and justice — at once an exciting melodrama, a terrifying nightmare . . . and a sort of poetic-theological statement concerning man and his soul.

Two-Handed Engine

by HENRY KUTTNER AND C. L. MOORE

Ever since the days of Orestes there have been men with Furies following them. It wasn't until the Twenty-Second Century that mankind made itself a set of real Furies, out of steel. Mankind had been through a lot by then. They had a good reason for building man-shaped Furies that would dog the footsteps of all men who kill men. Nobody else. There was by then no other crime of any importance.

It worked very simply. Without warning, a man who thought himself safe would suddenly hear the steady footfalls behind him. He would turn and see the two-handed engine walking toward him, shaped like a man of steel, and more incorruptible than any man not made of steel could be. Only then would the murdered know he had been tried and condemned by the omniscient electronic minds that knew society as no human mind could ever know it.

For the rest of his days, the man would hear those footsteps behind him. A moving jail with invisible bars that shut him off from the world. Never in life would he be alone again. And one day — he never knew when — the jailer would turn executioner.

Danner leaned back comfortably in his contoured restaurant chair and rolled expensive wine across his tongue, closing his eyes to enjoy the taste of it better. He felt perfectly safe. Oh, perfectly protected. For nearly an hour now he had been sitting here, ordering the most ex-

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pensive food, enjoying the music breathing softly through the air, the murmurous, well-bred hush of his fellow diners. It was a good place to be. It was very good, having so much money — now.

True, he had had to kill to get the money. But no guilt troubled him. There is no guilt if you aren't found out, and Danner had protection. Protection straight from the source, which was something new in the world. Danner knew the consequences of killing. If Hartz hadn't satisfied him that he was perfectly safe, Danner would never have pulled the trigger. . . .

The memory of an archaic word flickered through his mind briefly. *Sin.* It evoked nothing. Once it had something to do with guilt, in an incomprehensible way. Not any more. Mankind had been through too much. Sin was meaningless now.

He dismissed the thought and tried the hearts-of-palm salad. He found he didn't like it. Oh well, you had to expect things like that. Nothing was perfect. He sipped the wine again, liking the way the glass seemed to vibrate like something faintly alive in his hand. It was good wine. He thought of ordering more, but then he thought no, save it, next time. There was so much before him, waiting to be enjoyed. Any risk was worth it. And of course, in this there had been no risk.

Danner was a man born at the wrong time. He was old enough to remember the last days of utopia, young enough to be trapped in the new scarcity economy the machines had clamped down on their makers. In his early youth he'd had access to free luxuries, like everybody else. He could remember the old days when he was an adolescent and the last of the Escape Machines were still operating, the glamorous, bright, impossible, vicarious visions that didn't really exist and never could have. But then the scarcity economy swallowed up pleasure. Now you got necessities but no more. Now you had to work. Danner hated every minute of it.

When the swift change came, he'd been too young and unskilled to compete in the scramble. The rich men today were the men who had built fortunes on cornering the few luxuries the machines still produced. All Danner had left were bright memories and a dull, resentful feeling of having been cheated. All he wanted were the bright days back, and he didn't care how he got them.

Well, now he had them. He touched the rim of the wineglass with his finger, feeling it sing silently against the touch. Blown glass? he wondered. He was too ignorant of luxury items to understand. But he'd learn. He had the rest of his life to learn in, and be happy.

He looked up across the restaurant and saw through the transparent dome of the roof the melting towers

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of the city. They made a stone forest as far as he could see. And this was only one city. When he was tired of it, there were more. Across the country, across the planet the network lay that linked city with city in a webwork like a vast, intricate, half-alive monster. Call it society.

He felt it tremble a little beneath him.

He reached for the wineglass and drank quickly. This faint uneasiness that seemed to shiver the foundations of the city was something new. It was because — yes, certainly it was because of a new fear.

It was because he had *not* been found out.

That made no sense. Of course the city was complex. Of course it operated on a basis of incorruptible machines. They, and only they, kept man from becoming very quickly another extinct animal. And of these the analogue computers, the electronic calculators, were the gyroscope of all living. They made and enforced the laws that were necessary now to keep mankind alive. Danner didn't understand much of the vast changes that had swept over society in his lifetime, but this much even he knew.

So perhaps it made sense that he felt society shiver because he sat here luxurious on foam-rubber, sipping wine, hearing soft music, and no Fury standing behind his chair to prove that the calculators were still guardians for mankind. . . .

If not even the Furies are incorruptible, what can a man believe in?

It was at that exact moment that the Fury arrived.

Danner heard every sound suddenly die out around him. His fork was halfway to his lips, but he paused, frozen, and looked up across the table and the restaurant toward the door.

The Fury was taller than a man. It stood there for a moment, the afternoon sun striking a blinding spot of brightness from its shoulder. It had no face, but it seemed to scan the restaurant leisurely, table by table. Then it stepped in under the doorframe and the sun-spot slid away and it was like a tall man encased in steel, walking slowly between the tables.

Danner said to himself, laying down his untasted food, "Not for me. Everyone else here is wondering. I *know*."

And like a memory in a drowning man's mind, clear, sharp and condensed into a moment, yet every detail clear, he remembered what Hartz had told him. As a drop of water can pull into its reflection a wide panorama condensed into a tiny focus, so time seemed to focus down to a pinpoint the half-hour Danner and Hartz had spent together, in Hartz's office with the walls that could go transparent at the push of a button.

He saw Hartz again, plump and blond, with the sad eyebrows. A man who looked relaxed until he began to talk, and then you felt the

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burning quality about him, the air of driven tension that made even the air around him seem to be restlessly trembling. Danner stood before Hartz's desk again in memory, feeling the floor hum faintly against his soles with the heartbeat of the computers. You could see them through the glass, smooth, shiny things with winking lights in banks like candles burning in colored glass cups. You could hear their faraway chattering as they ingested facts, meditated them, and then spoke in numbers like cryptic oracles. It took men like Hartz to understand what the oracles meant.

"I have a job for you," Hartz said. "I want a man killed."

"Oh no," Danner said. "What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

"Now wait a minute. You can use money, can't you?"

"What for?" Danner asked bitterly. "A fancy funeral?"

"A life of luxury. I know you're not a fool. I know damned well you wouldn't do what I ask unless you got money *and* protection. That's what I can offer. Protection."

Danner looked through the transparent wall at the computers.

"Sure," he said.

"No, I mean it. I—" Hartz hesitated, glancing around the room a little uneasily, as if he hardly trusted his own precautions for making sure of privacy. "This is something new." he said. "I can re-direct any Fury I want to."

"Oh, sure," Danner said again.

"It's true. I'll show you. I can pull a Fury off any victim I choose."

"How?"

"That's my secret. Naturally. In effect, though, I've found a way to feed in false data, so the machines come out with the wrong verdict before conviction, or the wrong orders after conviction."

"But that's—dangerous, isn't it?"

"Dangerous?" Hartz looked at Danner under his sad eyebrows. "Well, yes. I think so. That's why I don't do it often. I've done it only once, as a matter of fact. Theoretically, I'd worked out the method. I tested it, just once. It worked. I'll do it again, to prove to you I'm telling the truth. After that I'll do it once again, to protect you. And that will be it. I don't want to upset the calculators any more than I have to. Once your job's done, I won't have to."

"Who do you want killed?"

Involuntarily Hartz glanced upward, toward the heights of the building where the top-rank executive offices were. "O'Reilly," he said.

Danner glanced upward too, as if he could see through the floor and observe the exalted shoe-soles of O'Reilly, Controller of the Calculators, pacing an expensive carpet overhead.

"It's very simple," Hartz said. "I want his job."

"Why not do your own killing, then, if you're so sure you can stop the Furies?"

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"Because that would give the whole thing away," Hartz said impatiently. "Use your head. I've got an obvious motive. It wouldn't take a calculator to figure out who profits most if O'Reilly dies. If I saved myself from a Fury, people would start wondering how I did it. But you've got no motive for killing O'Reilly. Nobody but the calculators would know, and I'll take care of them."

"How do I know you can do it?"

"Simple. Watch."

Hartz got up and walked quickly across the resilient carpet that gave his steps a falsely youthful bounce. There was a waist-high counter on the far side of the room, with a slanting glass screen on it. Nervously Hartz punched a button, and a map of a section of the city sprang out in bold lines on its surface.

"I've got to find a sector where a Fury's in operation now," he explained. The map flickered and he pressed the button again. The unstable outlines of the city streets wavered and brightened and then went out as he scanned the sections fast and nervously. Then a map flashed on which had three wavering streaks of colored light crisscrossing it, intersecting at one point near the center. The point moved very slowly across the map, at just about the speed of a walking man reduced to miniature in scale with the street he walked on. Around him the colored lines wheeled slowly, keeping their focus always steady on the single point.

"There," Hartz said, leaning forward to read the printed name of the street. A drop of sweat fell from his forehead onto the glass, and he wiped it uneasily away with his fingertip. "There's a man with a Fury assigned to him. All right, now. I'll show you. Look here."

Above the desk was a newsscreen. Hartz clicked it on and watched impatiently while a street scene swam into focus. Crowds, traffic noises, people hurrying, people loitering. And in the middle of the crowd a little oasis of isolation, an island in the sea of humanity. Upon that moving island two occupants dwelt, like a Crusoe and a Friday, alone. One of the two was a haggard man who watched the ground as he walked. The other islander in this deserted spot was a tall, shining, man-formed shape that followed at his heels.

As if invisible walls surrounded them, pressing back the crowds they walked through, the two moved in an empty space that closed in behind them, opened up before them. Some of the passersby stared, some looked away in embarrassment or uneasiness. Some watched with a frank anticipation, wondering perhaps at just what moment the Friday would lift his steel arm and strike the Crusoe dead.

"Watch, now," Hartz said nervously. "Just a minute. I'm going to pull the Fury off this man. Wait." He crossed to his desk, opened a drawer, bent secretively over it.

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Danner heard a series of clicks from inside, and then the brief chatter of tapped keys. "Now," Hartz said, closing the drawer. He moved the back of his hand across his forehead. "Warm in here, isn't it? Let's get a closer look. You'll see something happen in a minute."

Back to the news-screen. He flicked the focus switch and the street scene expanded, the man and his pacing jailor swooped upward into close focus. The man's face seemed to partake subtly of the impassive quality of the robot's. You would have thought they had lived a long time together, and perhaps they had. Time is a flexible element, infinitely long sometimes in a very short space.

"Wait until they get out of the crowd," Hartz said. "This mustn't be conspicuous. There, he's turning now."

The man, seeming to move at random, wheeled at an alley corner and went down the narrow, dark passage away from the thoroughfare. The eye of the news-screen followed him as closely as the robot.

"So you do have cameras that can do that," Danner said with interest. "I always thought so. How's it done? Are they spotted at every corner, or is it a beam trans —"

"Never mind," Hartz said. "Trade secret. Just watch. We'll have to wait until — no, no! Look, he's going to try it now!"

The man glanced furtively behind him. The robot was just turning the corner in his wake. Hartz darted back to his desk and pulled the drawer open. His hand poised over it, his eyes watched the screen anxiously. It was curious how the man in the alley, though he could have no inkling that other eyes watched, looked up and scanned the sky, gazing directly for a moment into the attentive, hidden camera and the eyes of Hartz and Danner. They saw him take a sudden, deep breath, and break into a run.

From Hartz's drawer sounded a metallic click. The robot, which had moved smoothly into a run the moment the man did, checked itself awkwardly and seemed to totter on its steel feet for an instant. It slowed. It stopped like an engine grinding to a halt. It stood motionless.

At the edge of the camera's range you could see the man's face, looking backward, mouth open with shock as he saw the impossible happen. The robot stood there in the alley, making indecisive motions as if the new orders Hartz pumped into its mechanisms were grating against inbuilt orders in whatever receptor it had. Then it turned its steel back upon the man in the alley and went smoothly, almost sedately, away down the street, walking as precisely as if it were obeying valid orders, not stripping the very gears of society in its aberrant behavior.

You got one last glimpse of the man's face, looking strangely stricken, as if his last friend in the world had left him.

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Hartz switched off the screen. He wiped his forehead again. He went to the glass wall and looked out and down as if he were half afraid the calculators might know what he had done. Looking very small against the background of the metal giants, he said over his shoulder, "Well, Danner?"

Was it well? There had been more talk, of course, more persuasion, a raising of the bribe. But Danner knew his mind had been made up from that moment. A calculated risk, and worth it. Well worth it. Except —

In the deathly silence of the restaurant all motion had stopped. The Fury walked calmly between the tables, threading its shining way, touching no one. Every face blanched, turned toward it. Every mind thought, "Can it be for me?" Even the entirely innocent thought, "This is the first mistake they've ever made, and it's come for me. The first mistake, but there's no appeal and I could never prove a thing." For while guilt had no meaning in this world, punishment did have meaning, and punishment could be blind, striking like the lightning.

Danner between set teeth told himself over and over, "Not for me. I'm safe. I'm protected. It hasn't come for me." And yet he thought how strange it was, what a coincidence, wasn't it, that there should be two murderers here under this expensive glass roof today? Himself, and the one the Fury had come for.

He released his fork and heard it clink on the plate. He looked down at it, and the food, and suddenly his mind rejected everything around him and went diving off on a fugitive tangent like an ostrich into sand. He thought about food. How did asparagus grow? What did raw food look like? He had never seen any. Food came ready-cooked out of restaurant kitchens or automat slots. Potatoes, now. What did they look like? A moist white mash? No, for sometimes they were oval slices, so the thing itself must be oval. But not round. Sometimes you got them in long strips, squared off at the ends. Something quite long and oval, then, chopped into even lengths. And white, of course. And they grew underground, he was almost sure. Long, thin roots twining white arms among the pipes and conduits he had seen laid bare when the streets were under repair. How strange that he should be eating something like thin, ineffectual human arms that embraced the sewers of the city and writhed palidly where the worms had their being. And where he himself, when the Fury found him, might . . .

He pushed the plate away.

An indescribable rustling and murmuring in the room lifted his eyes for him as if he were an automaton. The Fury was halfway across the room now, and it was almost funny to see the relief upon those whom it had passed by. Two or

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three of the women had buried their faces in their hands, and one man had slipped quietly from his chair in a dead faint as the Fury's passing released their private dreads back into their hidden wells.

The thing was quite close now. It looked to be about seven feet tall, and its motion was very smooth, which was unexpected when you thought about it. Smoother than human motions. Its feet fell with a heavy, measured tread upon the carpet. Thud, thud, thud. Danner tried impersonally to calculate what it weighed. You always heard that they made no sound except for that terrible tread, but this one creaked very slightly somewhere. It had no features, but the human mind couldn't help sketching in lightly a sort of airy face upon that blank steel surface, with eyes that seemed to search the room.

It was coming closer. Now all eyes were converging toward Danner. And the Fury came straight on. It almost looked as if —

"No!" Danner said to himself. "Oh, no, this can't be!" He felt like a man in a nightmare, on the verge of waking. "Let me wake soon," he thought. "Let me wake *now*, before it gets here!"

But he did not wake. And now the thing stood over him, and the thudding footsteps stopped. There was the faintest possible creaking as it towered over his table, motionless, waiting, its featureless face turned toward his.

Danner felt an intolerable tide of heat surge up into his face — rage, shame, disbelief. His heart pounded so hard the room swam and a sudden pain like jagged lightning shot through his head from temple to temple.

He was on his feet, shouting.

"No, no!" he yelled at the impassive steel. "You're wrong! You've made a mistake! Go away, you damned fool! You're wrong, you're wrong!" He groped on the table without looking down, found his plate and hurled it straight at the armored chest before him. China shattered. Spilled food smeared a white and green and brown stain over the steel. Danner floundered out of his chair, around the table, past the tall metal figure toward the door.

All he could think of now was Hartz.

Seas of faces swam by him on both sides as he stumbled out of the restaurant. Some watched with avid curiosity, their eyes seeking his. Some did not look at all, but gazed at their plates rigidly or covered their faces with their hands. Behind him the measured tread came on, and the rhythmic faint creak from somewhere inside the armor.

The faces fell away on both sides and he went through a door without any awareness of opening it. He was in the street. Sweat bathed him and the air struck icy, though it was not a cold day. He looked blindly left and right, and then plunged for a

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bank of phone booths half a block away, the image of Hartz swimming before his eyes so clearly he blundered into people without seeing them. Dimly he heard indignant voices begin to speak and then die into awe-struck silence. The way cleared magically before him. He walked in the newly created island of his isolation up to the nearest booth.

After he had closed the glass door the thunder of his own blood in his ears made the little sound-proofed booth reverberate. Through the door he saw the robot stand passionlessly waiting, the smear of spilled food still streaking its chest like some robotic ribbon of honor across a steel shirtfront.

Danner tried to dial a number. His fingers were like rubber. He breathed deep and hard, trying to pull himself together. An irrelevant thought floated across the surface of his mind. I forgot to pay for my dinner. And then: A lot of good the money will do me now. Oh, damn Hartz, damn him, damn him!

He got the number.

A girl's face flashed into sharp, clear colors on the screen before him. Good, expensive screens in the public booths in this part of town, his mind noted impersonally.

"This is Controller Hartz's office. May I help you?"

Danner tried twice before he could give his name. He wondered if the girl could see him, and behind him, dimly through the glass, the tall waiting figure. He couldn't tell, because she dropped her eyes immediately to what must have been a list on the unseen table before her.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Hartz is out. He won't be back today."

The screen drained of light and color.

Danner folded back the door and stood up. His knees were unsteady. The robot stood just far enough back to clear the hinge of the door. For a moment they faced each other. Danner heard himself suddenly in the midst of an uncontrollable giggling which even he realized verged on hysteria. The robot with the smear of food like a ribbon of honor looked so ridiculous. Danner to his dim surprise found that all this while he had been clutching the restaurant napkin in his left hand.

"Stand back," he said to the robot. "Let me out. Oh, you fool, don't you know this is a mistake?" His voice quavered. The robot creaked faintly and stepped back.

"It's bad enough to have you follow me," Danner said. "At least, you might be clean. A dirty robot is too much — too much —" The thought was idiotically unbearable, and he heard tears in his voice. Half laughing, half weeping, he wiped the steel chest clean and threw the napkin to the floor.

And it was at that very instant, with the feel of the hard chest still vivid in his memory, that realization finally broke through the protective screen of hysteria, and he remem-

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bered the truth. He would never in life be alone again. Never while he drew breath. And when he died, it would be at these steel hands, perhaps upon this steel chest, with the passionless face bent to his, the last thing in life he would ever see. No human companion, but the black steel skull of the Fury.

It took him nearly a week to reach Hartz. During the week, he changed his mind about how long it might take a man followed by a Fury to go mad. The last thing he saw at night was the streetlight shining through the curtains of his expensive hotel suite upon the metal shoulder of his jail. All night long, waking from uneasy slumber, he could hear the faint creaking of some inward mechanism functioning under the armor. And each time he woke it was to the wonder whether he would ever wake again. Would the blow fall while he slept? And what kind of blow? How did the Furies execute? It was always a faint relief to see the bleak light of early morning shine upon the watcher by his bed. At least he had lived through the night. But was this living? And was it worth the burden?

He kept his hotel suite. Perhaps the management would have liked him to go, but nothing was said. Possibly they didn't dare. Life took on a strange, transparent quality, like something seen through an invisible wall. Outside of trying to reach Hartz, there was nothing Danner wanted to do. The old desires for luxuries, entertainment, travel, had melted away. He wouldn't have traveled alone.

He did spend hours in the public library, reading all that was available about the Furies. It was here that he first encountered the two haunting and frightening lines Milton wrote when the world was small and simple, mystifying lines that made no certain sense to anybody until man created a Fury out of steel, in his own image.

But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more. . . .

Danner glanced up at his own two-handed engine, motionless at his shoulder, and thought of Milton and the long ago times when life was simple and easy. He tried to picture the past. The Twentieth Century, when all civilizations together crashed over the brink in one majestic downfall to chaos. And the time before that, when people were . . . different, somehow. But how? It was too far and too strange. He could not imagine the time before the machines.

But he learned for the first time what had really happened, back there in his early years, when the bright world finally blinked out entirely and gray drudgery began. And the Furies were first forged in the likeness of man.

Before the really Big Wars began, technology advanced to the point

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where machines bred upon machines like living things, and there might have been an Eden on earth, with everybody's wants fully supplied, except that the social sciences fell too far behind the physical sciences. When the decimating wars came on, machines and people fought side by side, steel against steel and man against man, but man was the more perishable. The wars ended when there were no longer two societies left to fight against each other. Societies splintered apart into smaller and smaller groups until a state very close to anarchy set in.

The machines licked their metal wounds meanwhile and healed each other as they had been built to do. They had no need for the social sciences. They went on calmly reproducing themselves and handing out to mankind the luxuries which the age of Eden had designed them to hand out. Imperfectly, of course. Incompletely, because some of their species were wiped out entirely and left no machines to breed and reproduce their kind. But most of them mined their raw materials, refined them, poured and cast the needed parts, made their own fuel, repaired their own injuries and maintained their breed upon the face of the earth with an efficiency man never even approached.

Meanwhile mankind splintered and splintered away. There were no longer any real groups, not even families. Men didn't need each other much. Emotional attachments dwindled. Men had been conditioned to accept vicarious surrogates and escapism was fatally easy. Men reoriented their emotions to the Escape Machines that fed them joyous, impossible adventure and made the waking world seem too dull to bother with. And the birth rate fell and fell. It was a very strange period. Luxury and chaos went hand in hand, anarchy and inertia were the same thing. And still the birth rate dropped. . . .

Eventually a few people recognized what was happening. Man as a species was on the way out. And man was helpless to do anything about it. But he had a powerful servant. So the time came when some unsung genius saw what would have to be done. Someone saw the situation clearly and set a new pattern in the biggest of the surviving electronic calculators. This was the goal he set: "Mankind must be made self-responsible again. You will make this your only goal until you achieve that end."

It was simple, but the changes it produced were world-wide and all human life on the planet altered drastically because of it. The machines were an integrated society, if man was not. And now they had a single set of orders which all of them reorganized to obey.

So the days of the free luxuries ended. The Escape Machines shut up shop. Men were forced back into groups for the sake of survival. They had to undertake now the work the

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machines withheld, and slowly, slowly, common needs and common interests began to spawn the almost lost feeling of human unity again.

But it was so slow. And no machine could put back into man what he had lost — the internalized conscience. Individualism had reached its ultimate stage and there had been no deterrent to crime for a long while. Without family or clan relations, not even feud retaliation occurred. Conscience failed, since no man identified with any other.

The real job of the machines now was to rebuild in man a realistic superego to save him from extinction. A self-responsible society would be a genuinely interdependent one, the leader identifying with the group, and a realistically internalized conscience which would forbid and punish "sin" — the sin of injuring the group with which you identify.

And here the Furies came in.

The machines defined murder, under any circumstances, as the only human crime. This was accurate enough, since it is the only act which can irreplaceably destroy a unit of society.

The Furies couldn't prevent crime. Punishment never cures the criminal. But it can prevent others from committing crime through simple fear, when they see punishment administered to others. The Furies were the symbol of punishment. They overtly stalked the streets on the heels of their condemned victims, the outward and visible sign that murder is always punished, and punished most publicly and terribly. They were very efficient. They were never wrong. Or at least, in theory they were never wrong, and considering the enormous quantities of information stored by now in the analogue computers, it seemed likely that the justice of the machines was far more efficient than that of humans could be.

Someday man would rediscover sin. Without it he had come near to perishing entirely. With it, he might resume his authority over himself and the race of mechanized servants who were helping him to restore his species. But until that day, the Furies would have to stalk the streets, man's conscience in metal guise, imposed by the machines man created a long time ago.

What Danner did during this time he scarcely knew. He thought a great deal of the old days when the Escape Machines still worked, before the machines rationed luxuries. He thought of this sullenly and with resentment, for he could see no point at all in the experiment mankind was embarked on. He had liked it better in the old days. And there were no Furies then, either.

He drank a good deal. Once he emptied his pockets into the hat of a legless beggar, because the man like himself was set apart from society by something new and terrible. For Danner it was the Fury. For the

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beggar it was life itself. Thirty years ago he would have lived or died unheeded, tended only by machines. That a begger could survive at all, by begging, must be a sign that society was beginning to feel twinges of awakened fellow feeling with its members, but to Danner that meant nothing. He wouldn't be around long enough to know how the story came out.

He wanted to talk to the beggar, though the man tried to wheel himself away on his little platform.

"Listen," Danner said urgently, following, searching his pockets. "I want to tell you. It doesn't feel the way you think it would. It feels —"

He was quite drunk that night, and he followed the beggar until the man threw the money back at him and thrust himself away rapidly on his wheeled platform, while Danner leaned against a building and tried to believe in its solidity. But only the shadow of the Fury, falling across him from the street-lamp, was real.

Later that night, somewhere in the dark, he attacked the Fury. He seemed to remember finding a length of pipe somewhere, and he struck showers of sparks from the great, impervious shoulders above him. Then he ran, doubling and twisting up alleys, and in the end he hid in a dark doorway, waiting, until the steady footsteps resounded through the night.

He fell asleep, exhausted.

It was the next day that he finally reached Hartz.

"What went wrong?" Danner asked. In the past week he had changed a good deal. His face was taking on, in its impassivity, an odd resemblance to the metal mask of the robot.

Hartz struck the desk-edge a nervous blow, grimacing when he hurt his hand. The room seemed to be vibrating not with the pulse of the machines below but with his own tense energy.

"*Something* went wrong," he said. "I don't know yet. I —"

"You don't know!" Danner lost part of his impassivity.

"Now wait." Hartz made soothing motions with his hands. "Just hang on a little longer. It'll be all right. You can —"

"How much longer have I got?" Danner asked. He looked over his shoulder at the tall Fury standing behind him, as if he were really asking the question of it, not Hartz. There was a feeling, somehow, about the way he said it that made you think he must have asked that question many times, looking up into the blank steel face, and would go on asking hopelessly until the answer came at last. But not in words . . .

"I can't even find that out," Hartz said. "Damn it, Danner, this was a risk. You knew that."

"You said you could control the computer. I saw you do it. I want to know why you didn't do what you promised."

"Something went wrong, I tell

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you. It should have worked. The minute this — business — came up I fed in the data that should have protected you."

"But what happened?"

Hartz got up and began to pace the resilient flooring. "I just don't know. We don't understand the potentiality of the machines, that's all. I thought I could do it. But —"

"You *thought!*"

"I know I can do it. I'm still trying. I'm trying everything. After all, this is important to me, too. I'm working as fast as I can. That's why I couldn't see you before. I'm certain I can do it, if I can work this out my own way. Damn it, Danner, it's complex. And it's not like juggling a comptometer. Look at those things out there."

Danner didn't bother to look.

"You'd better do it," he said. "That's all."

Hartz said furiously, "Don't threaten me! Let me alone and I'll work it out. But don't threaten me."

"You're in this too," Danner said.

Hartz went back to his desk and sat down on the edge of it.

"How?" he asked.

"O'Reilly's dead. You paid me to kill him."

Hartz shrugged. "The Fury knows that," he said. "The computers know it. And it doesn't matter a damn bit. Your hand pulled the trigger, not mine."

"We're both guilty. If I suffer for it, you —"

"Now wait a minute. Get this straight. I thought you knew it. It's a basis of law enforcement, and always has been. Nobody's punished for intention. Only for actions. I'm no more responsible for O'Reilly's death than the gun you used on him."

"But you lied to me! You tricked me! I'll —"

"You'll do as I say, if you want to save yourself. I didn't trick you, I just made a mistake. Give me time and I'll retrieve it."

"*How long?*"

This time both men looked at the Fury. It stood impassive.

"I don't know how long," Danner answered his own question. "You say you don't. Nobody even knows how he'll kill me, when the time comes. I've been reading everything that's available to the public about this. Is it true that the method varies, just to keep people like me on tenterhooks? And the time allowed — doesn't that vary too?"

"Yes, it's true. But there's a minimum time — I'm almost sure. You must still be within it. Believe me, Danner, I can still call off the Fury. You saw me do it. You know it worked once. All I've got to find out is what went wrong this time. But the more you bother me the more I'll be delayed. I'll get in touch with you. Don't try to see me again."

Danner was on his feet. He took a few quick steps toward Hartz, fury and frustration breaking up the im-

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passive mask which despair had been forming over his face. But the solemn footsteps of the Fury sounded behind him. He stopped.

The two men looked at each other.

"Give me time," Hartz said. "Trust me, Danner."

In a way it was worse, having hope. There must until now have been a kind of numbness of despair that had kept him from feeling too much. But now there was a chance that after all he might escape into the bright and new life he had risked so much for — if Hartz could save him in time.

Now, for a period, he began to savor experience again. He bought new clothes. He traveled, though never, of course, alone. He even sought human companionship again and found it — after a fashion. But the kind of people willing to associate with a man under this sort of death sentence was not a very appealing type. He found, for instance, that some women felt strongly attracted to him, not because of himself or his money, but for the sake of his companion. They seemed enthralled by the opportunity for a close, safe brush with the very instrument of destiny. Over his very shoulder, sometimes, he would realize they watched the Fury in an ecstasy of fascinated anticipation. In a strange reaction of jealousy, he dropped such people as soon as he recognized the first coldly flirtatious glance one of them cast at the robot behind him.

He tried farther travel. He took the rocket to Africa, and came back by way of the rain-forests of South America, but neither the night clubs nor the exotic newness of strange places seemed to touch him in any way that mattered. The sunlight looked much the same, reflecting from the curved steel surfaces of his follower, whether it shone over lion-colored savannahs or filtered through the hanging gardens of the jungles. All novelty grew dull quickly because of the dreadfully familiar thing that stood forever at his shoulder. He could enjoy nothing at all.

And the rhythmic beat of footfalls behind him began to grow unendurable. He used earplugs, but the heavy vibration throbbed through his skull in a constant measure like an eternal headache. Even when the Fury stood still, he could hear in his head the imaginary beating of its steps.

He bought weapons and tried to destroy the robot. Of course he failed. And even if he succeeded he knew another would be assigned to him. Liquor and drugs were no good. Suicide came more and more often into his mind, but he postponed that thought, because Hartz had said there was still hope.

In the end, he came back to the city to be near Hartz — and hope. Again he found himself spending most of his time in the library, walking no more than he had to be-

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cause of the footsteps that thudded behind him. And it was here, one morning, that he found the answer. . . .

He had gone through all available factual material about the Furies. He had gone through all the literary references collated under that heading, astonished to find how many there were and how apt some of them had become — like Milton's two-handed engine — after the lapse of all these centuries. "*Those strong feet that followed, followed after,*" he read. ". . . *with unhurrying chase, And unperturbed pace, Deliberate speed, majestic instancy. . . .*" He turned the page and saw himself and his plight more literally than any allegory:

I shook the pillaring hours
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
I stand amid the dust of the mounded years —
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.

He let several tears of self-pity fall upon the page that pictured him so clearly.

But then he passed on from literary references to the library's store of filmed plays, because some of them were cross-indexed under the heading he sought. He watched Orestes hounded in modern dress from Argos to Athens with a single seven-foot robot Fury at his heels instead of the three snake-haired Erinyes of legend. There had been an outburst of plays on the theme when the Furies first came into usage. Sunk in a half-dream of his own boyhood memories when the Escape Machines still operated Danner lost himself in the action of the films.

He lost himself so completely that when the familiar scene first flashed by him in the viewing booth he hardly questioned it. The whole experience was part of a familiar boyhood pattern and he was not at first surprised to find one scene more vividly familiar than the rest. But then memory rang a bell in his mind and he sat up sharply and brought his fist down with a bang on the stop-action button. He spun the film back and ran the scene over again.

It showed a man walking with his Fury through city traffic, the two of them moving in a little desert island of their own making, like a Crusoe with a Friday at his heels. . . . It showed the man turn into and alley, glance up at the camera anxiously, take a deep breath and break into a sudden run. It showed the Fury hesitate, make indecisive motions and then turn and walk quietly and calmly away in the other direction, its feet ringing on the pavement hollowly. . . .

Danner spun the film back again and ran the scene once more, just to make doubly sure. He was shaking so hard he could scarcely manipulate the viewer.

"How do you like that?" he muttered to the Fury behind him in the

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dim booth. He had by now formed a habit of talking to the Fury a good deal, in a rapid, mumbling undertone, not really aware he did it. "What do you make of that, you? Seen it before, haven't you? Familiar, isn't it? Isn't it! *Isn't it!* Answer me, you damned dumb hulk!" And reaching backward, he struck the robot across the chest as he would have struck Hartz if he could. The blow made a hollow sound in the booth, but the robot made no other response, though when Danner looked back inquiringly at it, he saw the reflections of the over-familiar scene, running a third time on the screen, running in tiny reflection across the robot's chest and faceless head, as if it too remembered.

So now he knew the answer. And Hartz had never possessed the power he claimed. Or if he did, had no intention of using it to help Danner. Why should he? His risk was over now. No wonder Hartz had been so nervous, running that film-strip off on a news-screen in his office. But the anxiety sprang not from the dangerous thing he was tampering with, but from sheer strain in matching his activities to the action in the play. How he must have rehearsed it, timing every move! And how he must have laughed, afterward.

"How long have I got?" Danner demanded fiercely, striking a hollow reverberation from the robot's chest. "How long? Answer me! Long enough?"

Release from hope was an ecstasy, now. He need not wait any longer. He need not try any more. All he had to do was get to Hartz and get there fast, before his own time ran out. He thought with revulsion of all the days he had wasted already, in travel and time-killing, when for all he knew his own last minutes might be draining away now. Before Hartz's did.

"Come along," he said needlessly to the Fury. "Hurry!"

It came, matching its speed to his, the enigmatic timer inside it ticking the moments away toward that instant when the two-handed engine would smite once, and smite no more.

Hartz sat in the Controller's office behind a brand-new desk, looking down from the very top of the pyramid now over the banks of computers that kept society running and cracked the whip over mankind. He sighed with deep content.

The only thing was, he found himself thinking a good deal about Danner. Dreaming of him, even. Not with guilt, because guilt implies conscience, and the long schooling in anarchic individualism was still deep in the roots of every man's mind. But with uneasiness, perhaps.

Thinking of Danner, he leaned back and unlocked a small drawer which he had transferred from his old desk to the new. He slid his hand in and let his fingers touch the controls lightly, idly. Quite idly.

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Two movements, and he could save Danner's life. For, of course, he had lied to Danner straight through. He could control the Furies very easily. He could save Danner, but he had never intended to. There was no need. And the thing was dangerous. You tamper once with a mechanism as complex as that which controlled society, and there would be no telling where the maladjustment might end. Chain-reaction, maybe, throwing the whole organization out of kilter. No.

He might someday have to use the device in the drawer. He hoped not. He pushed the drawer shut quickly, and heard the soft click of the lock.

He was Controller now. Guardian, in a sense, of the machines which were faithful in a way no man could ever be. *Quis custodiet*, Hartz thought. The old problem. And the answer was: Nobody. Nobody, today. He himself had no superiors and his power was absolute. Because of this little mechanism in the drawer, nobody controlled the Controller. Not an internal conscience, and not an external one. Nothing could touch him. . . .

Hearing the footsteps on the stairs, he thought for a moment he must be dreaming. He had sometimes dreamed that he was Danner, with those relentless footfalls thudding after him. But he was awake now.

It was strange that he caught the almost subsonic beat of the approaching metal feet before he heard the storming steps of Danner rushing up his private stairs. The whole thing happened so fast that time seemed to have no connection with it. First he heard the heavy, subsonic beat, then the sudden tumult of shouts and banging doors downstairs, and then last of all the thump, thump of Danner charging up the stairs, his steps so perfectly matched by the heavier thud of the robot's that the metal trampling drowned out the tramp of flesh and bone and leather.

Then Danner flung the door open with a crash, and the shouts and tramplings from below funneled upward into the quiet office like a cyclone rushing toward the hearer. But a cyclone in a nightmare, because it would never get any nearer. Time had stopped.

Time had stopped with Danner in the doorway, his face convulsed, both hands holding the revolver because he shook so badly he could not brace it with one.

Hartz acted without any more thought than a robot. He had dreamed of this moment too often, in one form or another. If he could have tampered with the Fury to the extent of hurrying Danner's death, he would have done it. But he didn't know how. He could only wait it out, as anxiously as Danner himself, hoping against hope that the blow would fall and the executioner strike before Danner guessed the truth. Or gave up hope.

So Hartz was ready when trouble

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came. He found his own gun in his hand without the least recollection of having opened the drawer. The trouble was that time had stopped. He knew, in the back of his mind, that the Fury must stop Danner from injuring anybody. But Danner stood in the doorway alone, the revolver in both shaking hands. And farther back, behind the knowledge of the Fury's duty, Hartz's mind held the knowledge that the machines could be stopped. The Furies could fail. He dared not trust his life to their incorruptibility, because he himself was the source of a corruption that could stop them in their tracks.

The gun was in his hand without his knowledge. The trigger pressed his finger and the revolver kicked back against his palm, and the spurt of the explosion made the air hiss between him and Danner.

He heard his bullet clang on metal.

Time started again, running double-pace to catch up. The Fury had been no more than a single pace behind Danner after all, because its steel arm encircled him and its steel hand was deflecting Danner's gun. Danner had fired, yes, but not soon enough. Not before the Fury reached him. Hartz's bullet struck first.

It struck Danner in the chest, exploding through him, and rang upon the steel chest of the Fury behind him. Danner's face smoothed out into a blankness as complete as the blankness of the mask above his head. He slumped backward, not falling because of the robot's embrace, but slowly slipping to the floor between the Fury's arm and its impervious metal body. His revolver thumped softly to the carpet. Blood welled from his chest and back.

The robot stood there impassive, a streak of Danner's blood slanting across its metal chest like a robotic ribbon of honor.

The Fury and the Controller of the Furies stood staring at each other. And the Fury could not, of course, speak, but in Hartz's mind it seemed to.

"Self-defense is no excuse," the Fury seemed to be saying. "We never punish intent, but we always punish action. Any act of murder. Any act of murder. . . ."

Hartz barely had time to drop his revolver in his desk drawer before the first of the clamorous crowd from downstairs came bursting through the door. He barely had the presence of mind to do it, either. He had not really thought the thing through this far.

It was, on the surface, a clear case of suicide. In a slightly unsteady voice he heard himself explaining. Everybody had seen the madman rushing through the office, his Fury at his heels. This wouldn't be the first time a killer and his Fury had tried to get at the Controller, begging him to call off the jailer and forestall the executioner. What had

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happened, Hartz told his underlings calmly enough, was that the Fury had naturally stopped the man from shooting Hartz. And the victim had then turned his gun upon himself. Powder-burns on his clothing showed it. (The desk was very near the door.) Back-blast in the skin of Danner's hands would show he had really fired a gun.

Suicide. It would satisfy any human. But it would not satisfy the computers.

They carried the dead man out. They left Hartz and the Fury alone, still facing each other across the desk. If anyone thought this was strange, nobody showed it.

Hartz himself didn't know if it was strange or not. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Nobody had ever been fool enough to commit murder in the very presence of a Fury. Even the Controller did not know exactly how the computers assessed evidence and fixed guilt. Should this Fury have been recalled, normally? If Danner's death were really suicide, would Hartz stand here alone now?

He knew the machines were already processing the evidence of what had really happened here. What he couldn't be sure of was whether this Fury had already received its orders and would follow him wherever he went from now on until the hour of his death. Or whether it simply stood motionless, waiting recall.

Well, it didn't matter. This Fury or another was already, in the present moment, in the process of receiving instructions about him. There was only one thing to do. Thank God there was something he *could* do.

So Hartz unlocked the desk drawer and slid it open, touched the clicking keys he had never expected to use. Very carefully he fed the coded information, digit by digit, into the computers. As he did, he looked out through the glass wall and imagined he could see down there in the hidden tapes the units of data fading into blankness and the new, false information flashing into existence.

He looked up at the robot. He smiled a little.

"Now you'll forget," he said. "You and the computers. You can go now. I won't be seeing you again."

Either the computers worked incredibly fast — as of course they did — or pure coincidence took over, because in only a moment or two the Fury moved as if in response to Hartz's dismissal. It had stood quite motionless since Danner slid through its arms. Now new orders animated it, and briefly its motion was almost jerky as it changed from one set of instructions to another. It almost seemed to bow, a stiff little bending motion that brought its head down to a level with Hartz's.

He saw his own face reflected in the blank face of the Fury. You could very nearly read an ironic note in that stiff bow, with the

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diplomat's ribbon of honor across the chest of the creature, symbol of duty discharged honorably. But there was nothing honorable about this withdrawal. The incorruptible metal was putting on corruption and looking back at Hartz with the reflection of his own face.

He watched it stalk toward the door. He heard it go thudding evenly down the stairs. He could feel the thuds vibrate in the floor, and there was a sudden sick dizziness in him when he thought the whole fabric of society was shaking under his feet.

The machines were corruptible.

Mankind's survival still depended on the computers, and the computers could not be trusted. Hartz looked down and saw that his hands were shaking. He shut the drawer and heard the lock click softly. He gazed at his hands. He felt their shaking echoed in an inner shaking, a terrifying sense of the instability of the world.

A sudden, appalling loneliness swept over him like a cold wind. He had never felt before so urgent a need for the companionship of his own kind. No one person, but people. Just people. The sense of human beings all around him, a very primitive need.

He got his hat and coat and went downstairs rapidly, hands deep in his pockets because of some inner chill no coat could guard against. Halfway down the stairs he stopped dead still.

There were footsteps behind him.

He dared not look back at first. He knew those footsteps. But he had two fears and he didn't know which was worse. The fear that a Fury was after him — and the fear that it was not. There would be a sort of insane relief if it really were, because then he could trust the machines after all, and this terrible loneliness might pass over him and go.

He took another downward step, not looking back. He heard the ominous footfall behind him, echoing his own. He sighed one deep sigh and looked back.

There was nothing on the stairs.

He went on down after a timeless pause, watching over his shoulder. He could hear the relentless feet thudding behind him, but no visible Fury followed. No visible Fury.

The Erinyes had struck inward again, and an invisible Fury of the mind followed Hartz down the stairs.

It was as if sin had come anew into the world, and the first man felt again the first inward guilt. So the computers had not failed, after all.

Hartz went slowly down the steps and out into the street, still hearing as he would always hear the relentless, incorruptible footsteps behind him that no longer rang like metal.

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The most attractive thing about Mildred Clingerman — as a writer, I hasten to add, to avoid misinterpretation ("or," as Elmer Davis once said, "interpretation either, for that matter") — is that no two of her stories are alike in theme or in tone; there is, thank God, no Clingerman formula. This one is about a wealthy bore whose only distinction was that he knew the forgotten cause of — but Mrs. Clingerman lets her story develop and reveal itself so easily that a blurb has no business even stating the theme.

The Last Prophet

by MILDRED CLINGERMAN

IT WAS SAID OF REGGIE PFISTER that he had an uncanny knack for appearing at the best and noisiest parties, wherever in the world they might be. To those scribes who reported the cavortings of international society, Reggie was as much a fixture as the fat ex-king, though not nearly so colorful. Reggie, too, was fat and rich; but nobody hung on his words, nobody scrambled to join his retinue. Reggie didn't have any retinue. Hostesses welcomed him for the reason that unattached, eligible males are always welcomed; but because of his well-known hobby and his penchant for droning on about it in a soft, flat monotone, people tended to avoid him whenever possible.

At very large parties, however, there were always a few who were unaware of his reputation as an amiable bore. Across the room from him, somebody would be struck by his likeness to a jolly (but spiritual) monk; somebody else (usually female) would recall acres of oil wells all labeled *Pfister;* or occasionally somebody's attention would be caught by the significant way Reggie glanced at his watch, then wrote in a worn little notebook. These were the people who threaded their way to his table.

Reggie's face always glowed with delight when this happened. Hopping up excitedly, Reggie pushed chairs about, signaled waiters, shook hands, and bounced on his toes till his guests, dizzied by his swooping, flight-like gestures, collapsed in their chairs gratefully. For the first few minutes Reggie was content to let the others talk — not because Reggie had finally learned to approach potential listeners warily (he hadn't), but because he liked the

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feeling that at any moment now he'd have the opportunity to present these smart, sophisticated people with some *real news!*

When he decided the time had come, almost any casual remark was enough to set Reggie going. Somebody might say, "It's a dull party," or, "Weren't you in Rome last week?"

Then Reggie would say: "That's a very interesting question. I'm glad you brought that up. . . . " And away he'd gallop on his hobbyhorse while his guests stared at him and nudged each other under the table. ". . . I'm sure you've noticed it," the flat voice would be hurrying now. "Everybody has noticed it at one time or another, but nobody does anything about it — like the weather, hmmm? But I have. Done something about it, I mean. For fifteen years I've kept records on it . . . right here in this little old notebook. I've gone to the noisiest parties — trying to play fair, you know. Must be scientific about these things, or a project's worthless. Worthless. As of this moment, I've recorded 12,938 occasions it has happened, all personally witnessed. No doubtfuls included, you understand. If there's so much as a giggle, say, from the terrace, I'm utterly ruthless with myself. I don't record it, though I am often tempted . . . yes, yes, very tempted. My record is four in one twenty-four hour period. I should so much like to make it five. . . ."

There was always one at the table who had failed to follow Reggie's tricky transition. In fact, in his eagerness to plunge into his subject, Reggie often forgot to lead into it at all. Asked what the hell he was talking about, Reggie would laugh and slap his thighs, and then take out his handkerchief and blow his nose. This seemed to have a sobering effect on everybody. Reggie, leaning carefully over his untouched drink, would tap the table with a pudgy forefinger, stare one by one into the glum faces around him, and ask a question.

"Haven't you ever noticed those dead-silent lulls that fall on groups of people? At a party like this one, for instance. Sooner or later this very night there'll come those few seconds when nobody is saying anything. When it happens, glance at your watch. You know what time it will be? *Twenty minutes after the hour.*" The pudgy finger lifted as if to halt protests. Nobody offered any. "Now mind you, some people will tell you that it also occurs at twenty minutes *to* the hour. I'll be honest with you. Sometimes it does. But out of 12,938 recorded instances, that has only happened, in my experience, 119 measly times. That clearly indicates to me just one thing: human fallibility. You discount human frailty, ordinary wear and tear, and the natural blurring after so long a time of the built-in blueprint for the human brain, and I'll guarantee that, *from*

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the beginning, we were supposed to be quiet at twenty minutes after every hour."

At this point, Reggie's listeners would be drooping listlessly over empty glasses and staring out at the gaiety around them with the sour faces of castaways watching a ship disappear over the horizon. But the waiters were heaving into view with drinks. Reggie saw to that. Almost anybody with a fresh drink before him will pause long enough to take a sip or two. Reggie counted on their doing so. Because now he was approaching the great heart of the matter. It was imperative that *this* time Reggie be allowed to finish what he had to say. But first he must fill them in, he thought, on some of the background.

"I've tracked this thing all over the world." (Reggie never varied his background-opener.) "I spent years hunting out the wisest men in every corner of the globe. To every one of them I put the same question: Why? *Why?* Most of them just laughed at me. . . . Now, I'm not blaming them. I can see how, just at first, my question might sound pretty unimportant to a busy man — the world being in the shape it is, and all. Their mistake was, they didn't ponder it long enough. If they'd bothered to think about it a while, they'd have seen as clearly as I do that, given the answer to *what makes people fall silent at twenty minutes past the hour*, we'd have a lot of other answers to some pretty deep questions. Like, *who are we?* for instance, and *is there a God?* Well. To make a long story short, I finally ran across a couple of old magi, real wise men of the East, like in the Bible. They study the stars and charts and ancient old tablets and books, you know. So I asked them, and they didn't laugh. 'Come back,' they said, 'in seven years and we'll try to answer your question.' So back I went, seven years later — that was a couple of years ago — and I find just this one feeble old man still alive, but he had the answer for me!

"Now I don't insist that you believe it. The answer, I mean. You people can look on it as a theory, if you like. But I'll frankly admit that I regard it as prophecy. That poor little old man . . . ! After his partner died, he'd worked on alone. He had a lot of dignity. The day before he died he took my hand and told me how lucky I was — said I was chosen to publish the good news and alert mankind. That made me feel good. But you have no idea how difficult it is! People don't seem to be interested. Oh, they'll listen politely enough for a while, but they never wait to find out the answer. . . ."

It was on the Riviera that Reggie's voice halted just at this point — one of those evenings when he was most hopeful of reaching his hearers. For a moment the whole room was quiet. Except for the wind that could be heard in the oleanders outside, the hush was complete.

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But only for a few seconds. Even while Reggie was consulting his watch, noise flowed back, with a woman's laughter bobbing atop the wave.

"You see!" Reggie crowed. "Twenty minutes after twelve!" But his guests were gone.

That kind of thing was always happening to Reggie. In Cairo or New York, in Madrid or Washington, D. C. — especially in Washington, D. C. It was there that Reggie had the devastating experience of barely opening his mouth when several people said, "I'm glad you brought that up," and what with all of them talking politics very fast and loud, completely drowned out Reggie's soft drone.

In Hollywood Reggie got only as far as the two magi, when a pert starlet insisted there should be three magi, and where was Reggie from?

"Why, I'm from East Fairview, Pennsylvania," he admitted shyly.

Whereupon the starlet dragged him off to a bedroom and draped him in a bedspread, proclaiming him for the rest of the evening as the third wise man from the East. The other two, she said, were a helluva lot brighter. They'd already given up and gone home.

In San Francisco Reggie poured out his story to a fascinated audience, up to the moment when he was about to divulge the prophecy. But in San Francisco everybody insisted on the right to think (and prophesy) for himself, and it all ended in the hurling of some high-class vocabulary and fisticuffs.

Reggie boarded a fast plane home to East Fairview, having wired his housekeeper to uncover the furniture in the drawing room and prepare for a big party. He invited all his relatives and in-laws, his old school chums, and the girls he'd left behind him. It was a very nice party. For the first time in his life, Reggie was able to record five dead-silent lulls; but even this triumph was questionable, since he later discovered that none of his relatives ever spoke to each other anyway. And as for relating the prophecy, Reggie hadn't a chance. He had forgotten that a prophet is without honor under his own rooftree.

Back again in New York, Reggie faced the fact that time was running out. There's something about an unshared hotel room, he thought, that presents any fact in the dreariest possible light.

Silently he addressed his image in the bureau mirror: Here am I, a lonely man, with a story to tell. I have *news*, and nobody listens. I'm fat and funny-looking and my voice is all wrong. Until fifteen years ago I led a perfectly useless existence. I'm not very smart; somebody else had to give me all the answers. I've shared food with people, and drinks, and room-space, but I've never shared a great experience. I'd like to share this. I'm the only man alive who knows . . .

Suddenly Reggie Pfister remem-

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bered that he was a rich man. He remembered it in a spirit of humility. If nobody would listen freely, then perhaps he could pay to be heard.

The psychiatrist's office was cool and quiet, except for the murmuring of the two nurses in the receptionist's cubicle. Reggie was very early for his appointment; he had been anxious to escape the hotel room and the bureau mirror. There was another patient waiting too, a young woman with the blank, unwritten-on face of a child. Reggie tried not to stare at her. He had the feeling that it might be bad form to show undue interest in patients waiting in the outer rooms of psychiatrists. But the young woman troubled him. She was very pale, and she was trembling. She turned the pages of the magazine she held with the excessive quietness and caution of a child who has been scolded too often and too harshly. Reggie, stealing little peeps at her over his own magazine, saw that she was crying. He had never before seen anybody weep in just that way. Two little unbroken streams of tears poured smoothly down her face and dripped onto her soft collar. She was scarcely making a sound.

Impulsively Reggie went to sit beside her. He glanced at the receptionist's cubicle. He and the girl were out of the line of sight of the nurses. They would have had to lean out their little window to watch the two patients; besides, they were now discussing hats. No interference there, Reggie thought, and he took the girl in his arms.

She fitted against him without resistance, pressing her head against his shoulder. After a while, when her trembling had subsided, Reggie wiped her eyes and her nose and smoothed back the fine, straight hair. He was rewarded with a small, tentative smile.

"I'm so frightened," the girl whispered, leaning very close to Reggie's ear, as if she were telling an important secret.

"Tell me why," Reggie whispered back.

"All the paths are dark," the girl said, "and I am afraid to turn corners."

"Yes," Reggie said. "And what else?"

"When I cry out in the night, nobody answers . . . and . . . and there are beasts in the forest who devour children, even very good children. Not a bit like in stories . . . Will you tell me a story?"

Reggie's eyes closed almost involuntarily, as if he wanted to contain for the moment his fierce joy. He shifted his arm then and drew her closer to him.

"Listen. . . ." he said. "Once upon a time — a *very* long time ago, when the world was young, a father gathered his children around him and said, 'I must go away for a time. I have work to do far away — so far that, though I shall travel faster

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than your good thoughts, yet will I not have reached the realm when your children's children are old. I do not like to leave my children fatherless, but I am needed elsewhere. I leave with you my boundless love, and lest you grow weary with longing for counsel, I bid you be silent and listen at such times every day —' "

Reggie paused and smiled down at the girl's rapt face. "And then," he continued, "the father set a kind of little clock humming in every child's head, with the times for listening clearly marked, so none could forget. Then he said, 'When I have finished my work, I will come home.' He kissed every child goodby and asked them all to be good, and then he went away."

"Did the old witch get them?" the girl asked in alarm.

"The old witch?" Reggie asked.

"You know. It's part of the game. . . . The father says, 'I'm going downtown to smoke my pipe, and I won't be back till the broad daylight. Don't let the old witch get you.' Then the children are supposed to say '*Tick-a-lock*' so they'll be safe behind the locked door. But mostly they forget that part," the girl mused.

Reggie nodded. "Yes, I expect these children forgot it, too. By and by, they, or their descendants, forgot a number of things. They forgot the trick of listening in a certain, special way; so that, as the father traveled farther and farther, and his voice grew smaller and smaller, finally they couldn't hear him at all. But the little clocks still kept humming — every child ever after was born with one built-in — and every day people still fell silent at the right times though they no longer knew why."

The girl stirred in his arms. "And then what happened?"

Reggie sighed. "The next part hasn't happened yet. In the meantime the world grows darker and darker without counsel, and you and I are afraid of the beasts in the forest. . . . But almost any day now," Reggie's face brightened, "something very nice will happen. You really mustn't be afraid, because —" Reggie struggled for the right words to phrase the prophecy, but found none. The girl waited quietly. In their cubicle, the two nurses were silent, too. Reggie stared at the clock on the wall. *Twenty minutes after 3.*

Suddenly, out of the silence, there was a great noise, as of the ripping of an enormous cloth, big enough to shroud the world. Then came a mighty rolling-back sound, as if the sky had parted and curled back on itself like two halves of a scroll. Light poured down into the waiting room, and the weight of it bowed the heads of all within. There was a sound like bells, and a sound like thunder. There was an immutable sound like power, and a joyous sound like glory. Reggie heard and noted the chill undertones of justice,

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but was most aware of the tender tones of love. Both the light and the sound grew and grew till they merged and became the Voice:

MY DEAR, OBEDIENT CHILDREN, I AM COMING HOME. . . .

There was a cessation of sound, and only the light remained. Then one of the nurses screamed, and the scream died away into a long, sobbing wail. This very human ululation brought Reggie's head up sharply. The old distress call of the pack found an instant reponse in his quickened heartbeat, and in the prickling down his backbone. It brought Reggie's head around to stare downward through the window behind him, however briefly. Still holding the girl, Reggie's arms were now wooden and unaware. His mouth was dry and he swallowed spasmodically to rid it of the metallic taste of adrenalin.

Below him the pack squirmed and crawled like maggots seeking an opening into the dark, sweet body of the earth. Reggie saw enacted with terrible clarity all that was animal in humankind. Under a rising accompaniment of wordless babble the monstrous pantomime unrolled for him. Reggie was lost in it and part of it, tooth and claw, till suddenly he caught sight of a man with his back to a wall, his arms and head raised defiantly, not against the howling mob, but *against the sky*. The puny, clenched fists of the man were so sad and so wonderful that Reggie smiled. . . . There was something in the gesture that returned all Reggie's humanity to him. The pack moved on, but Reggie turned and looked at the girl.

Bathed in the great light, her face showed no fear. When her serene eyes met his, Reggie was able for a moment to meet her gaze without faltering. Except that . . . His eyes closed in shame for the niggling little shred of vanity and disappointment he was wrestling with. *If only I could have had another minute* . . . he thought.

"You are troubled," she said.

"It's nothing really," Reggie said. "It's just that I wanted to tell you something, but time ran out."

Note:

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Stephen Arr has been a B-24 navigator, a career diplomat, a political reporter, a mountain climber and an advertising man — a varied background that any writer might envy. There's cause for envy, too, in the neatly cogent notion behind this story of a blackmailer and a mathematician who sought to tamper with things as they are, and learned the inexorable connection between effect and cause.

Cause

by STEPHEN ARR

UNTIL GEORGE BRINK SAW THE salt shaker move obligingly by itself across the dinner table into Professor Graves's waiting hand, he had decided that his table companions on the *S.S. Constitution*, en route from Genoa to New York, were a total loss to a man of his profession, which happened to be the practice of blackmail.

At the salt shaker's touch, Professor Graves glanced down startled, then his face turned white and his body froze. In a fraction of a second he recovered control of himself, and glanced quickly around the table to see if anyone else had noticed. The others at the table, a young English couple named Thomas on their way to a Bermuda honeymoon, and a mother and grown-up-daughter team named Small belonging to a prosperous real estate broker from Westchester who had sent them to Italy for the summer, were too interested in what they were saying to have noticed the salt shaker.

The Professor's glance, George noted, was not that of a bewildered man seeking confirmation of an unusual occurrence, but rather that of a guilty man peering around to see if he had been caught in the act.

However, George made sure, by a questioning raise of his eyebrows, that Professor Graves knew that he had seen the whole incident. Then, with a feeling of suppressed excitement, George rose, and excusing himself, went up to his cabin to wait for the Professor to approach him with the inevitable explanation, true or not.

Back in his first class suite, George reviewed what he knew of Professor Graves. During the first dinner on board, the Professor had let information drop like a calling card at the beginning of the meal, as though eager to get it over with. He was a

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professor of mathematics at a well known midwestern university, and he had just combined a vacation in Europe with an International Mathematical Congress at Berne.

At that meal, George, after having studied the thin, eye-glassed, scholarly Mathematician with professional acumen, had reluctantly decided that he was not the type to have absconded with the University's funds or to have left a mistress in his cabin.

Waiting for the Professor, George Brink glanced at the mirror in his cabin and confirmed that he was handsome. His hard blue eyes recorded this asset more coldly than a businessman in another line would record the receipt of a shipment of salt fish. He also remembered, without pleasure, that he was charming, suave, and sophisticated.

But at the moment, he had one glaring liability. He was short of the kind of money required to make an impression in the circles in New York where he could hope to reap a large dividend. With the war scare, it had been a bad season at Cannes.

He waited until late, but Professor Graves did not oblige, and George finally went to sleep disillusioned.

Though George was quite irritated by this lack of cooperation when he woke up the next morning, he conceded regretfully that there was nothing criminal about moving salt cellars. All he could do about Professor Graves, he decided, was to wait for another slip that would deliver the frightened Professor into his none too gentle hands. He would have two meals a day for ten days in which to study his surprising tablemate. In the meantime, there were other fish to be caught.

During the next three days George got nowhere with the Professor and managed to land only one small fish — a middle-aged Swiss banker who made nightly excursions down the hall to the cabin of a young chanteuse. There would be some profit from his knowledge, George knew, but not much since the banker struck him as a hardheaded man who knew exactly how much both his reputation and his wife's opinion of him were worth in either Swiss francs or American dollars.

His trip began to look like a complete failure, when the break came the sixth night at dinner, and from an entirely unexpected bit of conversation.

"And did any of you get to Monte Carlo?" Miss Small was asking of the table at large.

"Oh yes," Mrs. Thomas said enthusiastically. "Aren't the cliffs magnificent?"

"Er, yes," Miss Small agreed crestfallen. "Actually we weren't quite able to make Monte Carlo, but we did get to San Remo. Aren't the Casinos fascinating? I mean those little balls on the spinning wheel, and the croupiers in tails, and all those chips on the table?"

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"It is rather fun to take a chance on the wheel," Howard Thomas said.

"Oh, you mean you've actually bet?" Miss Small asked wide-eyed. "Do you know how to win?"

"Not quite," Howard Thomas replied with a laugh. "I was ahead for a while, but I'm afraid I kept at it too long. The only person I've ever heard of winning consistently was able to control that little ball."

"How?" Professor Graves asked suddenly, too sharply. Everyone looked startled for a moment.

George quietly told the waiter to pour champagne all around.

"Well," Thomas said a little embarrassed, "I've only heard this story, but I believe he could control the ball by the force of his mind. Do you think that that might be possible, Professor?"

Professor Graves frowned. "I imagine so, but I think it would be extremely difficult to put a small ball into a given hole on a moving wheel. That is, I doubt if you could do it even with your hand, because until the wheel stops you can't really see the numbers."

"Yes, that's so," Thomas agreed.

"Gentlemen," George said, "bottoms up."

They all drained their glasses. A little alcohol, George thought, could go a long way towards loosening a man's tongue. Especially concerning something that bothered him.

"You mean, Professor," Miss Small asked wide-eyed, "that some people can move things with their minds?"

"No," Professor Graves corrected with a smile, "I only said that it might be possible." He took another sip of his refilled glass. "There are other ways that it could be done," he added reflectively, staring at the bubbles rising in his glass.

"How?" Mrs. Thomas asked.

"Magnets," the Professor replied with a sudden laugh, then he changed the subject abruptly. "This is an excellent champagne, Mr. Brink. It reminds me a bit of Asti Spumante. Did any of you get to see Asti?"

"Oh yes," George said quickly, beating Mrs. Small to the punch.

"Talking about controlling a roulette game," he continued, "I'm more interested in a game of chance and skill called poker. I wonder how it could be done with a deck of cards. That is, even if you could move a given card at will, wouldn't everyone else see it getting out of the pack and hopping around? Besides, wouldn't you have to know the card's location before you could move it? And in a shuffled deck, how would you find the card you want?"

"It wouldn't be the best way to do it," Professor Graves agreed.

"But what would?" Mrs. Small asked interested.

"Why, just wishing on a star," Howard Thomas answered with a laugh. "You wish that you have

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four aces, the laws of cause and effect are set aside, and there you are with the winning hand."

"You can't set the laws of cause and effect aside," the Professor said in a harsh voice.

George tensed.

Howard Thomas looked surprised, then a little annoyed. "I don't see why not," he snapped. "I was only speaking hypothetically, and hypothetically speaking you can do anything."

"But set aside the laws of cause and effect," Professor Graves finished with an air of finality.

"You seem to know all about the subject," Thomas sneered. "I suppose you've had great experience in making matter conform to your wishes."

"I have," Professor Graves declared angrily.

Mrs. Thomas tried to interrupt. "Mr. Brink," she said, "Would you say that Spumante is as good as champagne?"

George ignored her.

Howard Thomas' eyes widened, then searched around the table. "All right. Let's see you break that glass," he said, pointed to the champagne glass clutched tightly in George's hand.

The Professor tensed for a moment, then suddenly rubbed his eyes wearily with his left hand. The hand was trembling. "No," he said. "Forget it. I don't want to."

"You don't want to," Howard Thomas mimicked sceptically.

"No, I don't want to," the Professor said sharply.

"Oh no," Thomas said.

Sudden fury flared in Professor Grave's eyes. George felt the glass in his hand quiver, then suddenly it was in pieces and champagne was wetting the sleeve of his jacket. Almost simultaneously he became aware of a sharp sting in his shoulder, like the sudden jab of the needle in a penicillin injection. Even as he stared dazedly at the stem of the glass held in his fingers, he saw that an advancing stain of red was mixing with the champagne soaking his sleeve.

"My God, he shot the glass," Howard Thomas whispered stupefied.

George's confused eyes sought the Professor. In front of him a tiny revolver lay on the white tablecloth. Smoke still curled lazily from the barrel.

Professor Graves picked up the revolver. There was a strange twisted grin on his face. He examined it curiously. "About a twenty caliber, Italian make," he said calmly, dropping it back on the table.

Miss Small suddenly screamed, "Mr. Brink is bleeding, get the doctor."

Professor Graves looked up startled and saw George's shoulder. He rose to his feet involuntarily. "Good heavens," he said. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right," George said, laughing humorlessly. "It's only a small caliber flesh wound." His cold

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eyes bored into the Professor's troubled ones. There was something here that he didn't understand, something that he would have to unravel, something that could mean money.

Two of the ship's officers hurried towards them.

The Professor picked the gun up slowly from the table and handed it to the officers, handle first, then he turned and left with them just as the doctor, who had been at dinner, hurried up and started fussing at George's shoulder. The expression on the Professor's face as he left eluded George for a moment, then he placed it. It was the expression that could be found on the face of a man on whom a practical joke had just been played, but who was trying to be a good sport.

Later that evening, George was secretly amused by the Captain's obvious admiration and relief at his generous attitude.

"It was just an unfortunate accident," George said, wincing a little as he shrugged his wounded shoulder. "He was showing us a trick, and somehow or other it went wrong. Naturally I have no intention of pressing charges. But before I drop them formally, I would like to have an opportunity to talk with Professor Graves."

"You are being awfully generous about this," the Captain, a little worried man weighted down by gold braid, repeated for the tenth time. "All the witnesses agree that some sort of trick was in progress. And of course there is no other motive. The gun is properly registered and the Professor has all the necessary permits. So if you are really convinced that it was accidental, after speaking with the Professor, I see no reason to hold him any longer."

The Captain rang for a steward and directed him to lead George to the stateroom where Professor Graves was being held.

"You're really being very sporting about this," the little Captain said again as he shook hands with George.

On the way down in the elevator, George could scarcely control his elation. He had the Professor. He had him pinned up against the wall, and he would squeeze him dry before he would let him go.

There was a single guard outside of the stateroom, who rose sullenly, unlocked the door, and let George in. The steward remained outside.

The Professor was seated on the bed, his head in his hands. He looked up as George entered. George noted that his thin face looked thinner, and there were circles under his eyes, brooding, troubled eyes. He stood up suddenly.

"I'm sorry," the Professor said in a low voice. "How's your shoulder?"

"It's O.K.," George said, slipping down into a comfortable armchair. "But what happened?" he demanded casually.

The Professor hesitated, bit his

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lip, shrugged. "It was a trick," he said, obviously ill at ease. "I usually shoot the glass from the inside of my pocket and it breaks. The bullet goes into the ceiling. Only this time I hit it at the wrong angle."

"Sit down," George ordered softly. "You're a poor liar. That glass quivered *before* it broke. Bullets don't shake things before they break them. Nor," George added, his cold eyes studying the Professor who had sunk back on the bed, "do salt cellars move by themselves. How about telling me the whole story?"

The Professor sat on the bed staring past George at the porthole with his brooding eyes.

"Come on," George said, allowing an unpleasant note to creep into his perfectly controlled voice. "I'll drop charges if you'll tell me the whole story. Otherwise you're liable to find yourself behind bars for a few long years."

The Professor shifted restlessly and a look of annoyed contempt crossed his face.

George shifted his attack instantly. "Don't misunderstand," he said in an aggrieved tone. "I don't mean to threaten. It's just that, after all, I have been shot, and I am entitled to an explanation. I mean," he managed to sound genuinely indignant, "all I want to know is why?"

The Professor looked at him undecided. "Yes, I guess you are entitled to an explanation, and frankly I would like to tell someone the story," he said more to himself than to George, who held his breath, waiting.

"Tell me, Mr. Brink," Professor Graves said with sudden decision, "are you acquainted with mathematics?"

"Not really," George said slowly, deliberately suppressing his eagerness. "I can add two and two, and find the hypotenuse of a right triangle, but I'm afraid the Einstein theory is out of my reach."

"Good," the Professor said. "Then there is no danger that you'll follow my footsteps. But I do want you to understand that mathematics is a highly imaginative science that in itself has no relationship to reality. You can take symbols and assign them arbitrary values or no values, and then from them build up an entire set of equations that are mathematically true, even though the results do not jibe with known facts or may not jibe with known facts until the original values of the symbols are discovered. I won't go any further into it, except to explain that I started to develop equations indicating how the power of the mind could affect matter. Actually, it was more of an exercise than a serious project. Finally, I developed one that seemed to indicate how the mind could obtain any given result — that is, make any desired situation exist.

"What happened next surprised

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me as much as if a fairy had flown into my window and offered me three wishes. I found that I could obtain any effect by merely desiring it. The explanation, of course, was simple. The equation was correct, and the equation had become part of the pattern of my mind.

"It's a strange thing," Professor Graves said leaning forward, "but it is impossible for the mind to consciously and deliberately forget anything. Not only do I have this extremely dangerous power, but I can't get rid of it."

"Now wait a minute," George protested, standing up in his excitement. "If I understood what you said, due to some mathematical formula, you can do anything you want. It strikes me that you are in a very fortunate position."

Professor Graves smiled bitterly. "But you don't understand," he said. "I can't do anything I want, I can only obtain any desired effect that I want."

George scowled and began to pace the room restlessly. "Let's put it this way," he said. "If you wanted to have a yacht, could you have one?"

"Yes," Professor Graves answered. His voice sounded dead.

"If you decided that you wanted a million dollars in the bank, could you have it?" George persevered, his voice trembling.

"Yes," Professor Graves replied.

George stopped pacing and stared at the Professor blankly. "Professor Graves," he said, "either you're crazy or I am. If I hadn't seen that salt shaker move across the table and if I hadn't felt the glass quiver, I'd have called for help long ago."

Professor Graves laughed bitterly. "No," he said, "Neither of us is crazy.

"However, in case you're interested," the Professor continued, "the salt shaker moved across the table because a thread had come loose from the tablecloth and wrapped around my cuff link at one end and around the salt shaker on the other. As for the glass, it quivered because the orchestra had struck an unusually high note that caused it to resonate. Inasmuch as it didn't break from that, the pistol was necessary."

"What in the hell is this all about?" George demanded.

Professor Graves shook his head wearily. "Don't you understand, it's the law of cause and effect. That's the basic law of the universe, and it can't be set aside.

"For example, you hit a golf ball. That's cause. It flies into the rough. That's effect. When you perform an action, create a cause, you don't know what the effect will be. That's the hazard of normal living.

"But it's an interchangeable equation. I create an effect, and I don't know what the cause will be. Try to understand it." The Professor's voice trembled. "The cause is supplied to fill out the equation, because

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without balanced cause and effect the universe as we know it would cease to exist. In other words, the moment I create an effect, the cause comes into being automatically."

"Wait a minute!" George said excitedly. "You mean that you made the glass break, and immediately the cause appeared — the gun?"

"That's right," Professor Graves said nodding encouragingly. "Not only one cause, but the whole logical sequence of causes. The proper documents for the gun were found in my trunk. Mr. Brink, I had never seen that gun before in my life, but if you traced it back you would find that I had walked into a shop somewhere in Italy and bought it."

"But still," George said frowning, "I don't see why your problems should be so great."

"Mr. Brink," Professor Graves said, "what if that bullet in the dining room had killed you? Though I didn't expect that anything so drastic would happen, wouldn't I have been responsible?

"Suppose, Mr. Brink, at some later date I should decide to become dictator of the world. Of course, I could be. But the causes would inevitably involve the deaths of millions. Even if I should decide to create world peace and prosperity, how would I know what terrible causes might be necessary to lead up to this desirable condition?"

"Yes, I see the disadvantages . . ." George said thoughtfully. "I also see the advantages," he added with sudden determination.

"Professor Graves," George continued, studying the Professor closely, "just how do you expect to get yourself out of this mess? If you will yourself out, it might result in the ship's sinking or God knows what."

"What do you mean?" the Professor demanded, his eyes widening in surprise. "I thought you were going to drop the charges."

"I was," George said coldly. "I will. If you coöperate."

The Professor whitened. "What do you mean? What do you want?" he whispered.

"Money," George replied.

"Professor Graves," he continued, turning and walking to the door, "I will set up an operation that will entail a minimum of risk of harm to anyone — a card game. I trust that you'll coöperate with your . . . unusual abilities."

"You're mad," Professor Graves whispered looking after him as though stunned. "I won't be part of any such thing."

George shrugged, wincing again as a stab of pain shot through his wounded shoulder. "Suit yourself," he said. You have until this evening to think it over. Consider the risks of willing yourself out of jail, and not as a fugitive from justice. The causes could be anything from a disaster on shipboard to the collapse of the government itself. Compare

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the risk with that of changing one hand in a card game."

Without waiting for the Professor's reply, George left the cabin and hurried upstairs. He had no difficulty in setting up a poker game for ten that evening. He even pinpointed his victim, a paint manufacturer named Clay from Ohio, whom he had observed several times playing poker in the lounge with the skill and daring of a born gambler.

At 9:30 sharp he visited the Professor again.

"Well?" George demanded.

Professor Graves looked haggard. He licked his lips nervously. "If you guarantee to drop the charges, I'll do it," he muttered. "But just this once . . ." George noted that it was more of an appeal than an ultimatum.

"Good," George said, pulling up a chair. "Here's what you do."

The poker game ran well. George managed to lose slightly, and to be unpleasant about it. With perfect control he deliberately irritated Charley Clay, the paint manufacturer, a gentle, soft-spoken man of about 35, until he destroyed every vestige of sympathy that Clay might normally feel for another player in what was presumably a friendly game.

Only the slightest twitch of excitement touched Charley Clay's mouth as he picked up the ten, jack, queen, and king of hearts in that order. A two of clubs was the last card, ruining the potential straight flush, but still leaving him a chance to draw for the straight, or the flush, or the straight flush.

George picked up the full house that he knew he would have. He showed no emotion; he was not gambling.

The man on George's right opened with ten dollars.

George sneered something about penny ante under his breath and raised it a hundred.

Clay, on his left, his mouth tightening with anger, raised him another hundred. The others promptly dropped out.

George called, to give Clay a chance to draw.

"Pat," George said to the dealer with a laughing sneer.

"One," Clay said.

He accepted the card eagerly, shuffled the five cards in his hand, and looked at them one by one. Ten, jack, queen, king, and . . . he had drawn the ace of hearts. A royal flush, the one hand that can't be beat in a game with nothing wild.

"Let's stop this kid stuff," George said disgustedly, as he pushed his whole pile of chips, worth a thousand dollars, into the pot. "Or are you yellow?" he asked Clay.

Clay glanced quickly at his hand, as though to reassure himself, then with a set jaw he pushed all his chips in, raising George another three thousand.

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George pulled out his check book. "Let's separate the men from the boys," he laughed without humor. He carefully wrote out a check for $75,000 and dropped it into the middle.

Clay licked his lips nervously. He looked at his unbeatable hand, and he looked at it again, then with awkward, trembling fingers he wrote a check for $72,000 and dropped it into the center.

"Called," he whispered through dry lips.

George laid his full house down on the table.

Clay put his hand down and leaned back in his chair with a loud sigh of relief. "Royal flush," he said.

George made sure that he kept well away from the other's cards. "Looks like a straight to me," he said coldly.

"What?" Clay said. "Where?" With trembling fingers he sorted his hand. There were four hearts and an ace of diamonds. He stood half up in disbelief, then sank down into his chair again. His face was white, and beads of sweat started to form above his upper lip.

"You must have mistaken the heart for another diamond," George said calmly, reaching over and pulling in the pot. "I've done it myself."

Clay came dazedly up to his feet. "Of course," he muttered automatically. "I'm sorry. Good night, gentlemen." He turned and walked stiffly to the door of the lounge.

"One moment," George called.

Clay turned wearily in the doorway and waited while George crossed the lounge.

"I just want to be sure that you're not going to try and stop payment on the check," George said, studying Clay with his cold blue eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" Clay asked bitterly, with open sarcasm. "Rush down and wire my bank authorizing payment?"

"Better than that," said George. "Let's make it a note. Payable on demand."

Their eyes locked.

Clay shrugged. "Anything you want," he said wearily.

George turned down the offer of assistance from a lawyer in the game; he had had experience drawing up notes before — always payable on demand. He accompanied Clay to the purser's office and superintended the proper witnessing of the note and its safe deposit in the purser's strongbox. Then he left the manufacturer to his own devices and returned to the game.

It was from the steward, bringing a fresh round of drinks, that George heard about Clay's suicide. He congratulated himself on his forethought; checks are not honored by a dead man's estate.

However the next morning he woke up slightly worried about whether he could collect the whole amount of the note. It would be best to ensure that Clay actually

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had the necessary assets. Fortunately, there was one certain way of doing that.

With the Captain's permission, George again visited Professor Graves.

"Well," the Professor said dully as George entered, switching off the music on his small table radio, "how did it work out?"

"Fine," George said heartily, relieved to find that the Professor had not yet heard about Clay's suicide. "Only I want to make sure that Clay actually has funds in the bank to cover his debt. How about willing that?"

Professor Graves smiled bitterly. "I thought you were going to refuse to press charges if I did what you wanted last-night. I'm still here, and now you want something else."

"Not really," George coaxed gently. "After all, nothing bad came out of what happened last night, and all I want is for you to make sure that I collect. I probably will anyway. You might say that it's part of what we did last night."

"You might," the Professor said shrugging.

"After all," George said, "there's nothing wrong in wishing someone else money in the bank."

"There is if you don't know how it's going to get there," the Professor said between tight lips. "Isn't that the whole problem? After all, I could have willed money into your account if there was no danger."

George dropped his pleasant manner. "This is part of our original bargain. Do it," he ordered, "and you'll get out of here. Don't do it, and you're on your own."

His cold blue eyes met the tired eyes of the Professor squarely, and it was the Professor who dropped his eyes first. "Just this," Professor Graves mumbled, "and no more. Do you understand?"

"O.K.," George said, smiling triumphantly as he turned and left.

He had a pleasant lunch, and after lunch wandered up to the Marine Lounge where he sat reading a magazine. It had been a highly successful voyage, and he felt the need of a little relaxation before he faced the problem of how best to keep his control over the Professor. He had no intention of letting him get away; on the other hand he knew that he could not keep him imprisoned indefinitely without rebellion.

The radio in the lounge started blaring out the two o'clock news, and George laid his magazine aside to listen absentmindedly to the little bits of trouble that were rocking the world. He snapped alert when he heard the Clay Paint and Chemical Company mentioned.

"A tragic fire," the announcer droned, "swept the Clay Paint and Chemical Company plant this morning, burning forty persons to death. The plant, which is heavily insured, flared up early this morning. An investigation is in progress."

George started to his feet, cursing.

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He would have to get to Professor Graves before he heard the news if he wanted to hold him.

Too impatient to wait for the elevator, he tore down the stairs to C deck and along the corridor to the cabin.

The guard opened the door unquestioningly and allowed him to enter.

The first thing that George saw was the table radio, now softly playing music. The second thing he saw was the Professor's face, and he knew that he was too late.

"Have you heard?" Professor Graves stormed at him, his face taut with fury. "You murderer, have you heard?"

"Take it easy, Professor, take it easy," George said soothingly.

To his relief the Professor did just that. He collapsed against the wall by the port hole, the fire went out of his eyes, and he covered his face with his hands.

"Oh God," he whispered. "How did I get into this mess? Forty innocent people burned to death . . ." He shuddered. "What a way to die! And Clay himself, a suicide. The guard told me —"

"Don't worry, Professor," George said. "No one will ever know. Just you and I."

"Just you and I," the Professor repeated bitterly. "Birds of a feather. Murderers. I wish I were dead."

He started to fall slowly forward.

"Professor!" George called out alarmed.

"*Wait!*" George screamed desperately as he suddenly saw the danger to himself.

Professor Graves hit the floor with a crash. A spreading stream of red crawled across the rug.

George stared dumbly at the smoking revolver in his hand. He had never seen it before, but he knew that somewhere it was registered in his name.

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Not all of our interstellar colonists will be heroes; nor, indeed, will all of them even be competent pioneers. It is not unthinkable that there will be colonies like that on Our Planet, colonies of the uprooted and unprepared, numbly working out their obscure destiny. Let not Ambition mock their useful toil; in this fragment from their short and simple annals Mr. Dickson finds a poignantly human story.

Our First Death

by GORDON R. DICKSON

JUNY VEWLAN DIED ABOUT 400 hours of the morning and we buried her that same day before noon at 1100 hours, because we had no means of keeping the body. She had not wanted to be cremated; and because she was our first and because some of her young horror at the thought of being done away with entirely had seeped into the rest of us during her illness (if you could call it illness — at any rate, as she lay dying), an exception was made in her case and we decided in full assembly to bury her.

As for the subsidiary reasons for this decision of ours, they were not actually clear to us at the time, nor yet indeed for a long time afterward. Certainly the fatherless, motherless girl had touched our hearts toward the end. Certainly the old man — her grandfather Gothrud Vewlan, who with his wife, Van Meyer and Kurt Meklin made up our four Leaders — caught us all up in the heartache of his own sorrow, as he stood feebly forth on the platform to ask of us this last favor for his dead grandchild. And certainly Kurt Meklin murmured against it, which was enough to dispose some of the more stiff-necked of us in its favor.

However — we buried her. It was a cold hard day, for winter had already set in on Our Planet. We carried her out over the unyielding ground, under the white and different sky, and lowered her down into the grave some of our men had dug for her. Beneath the transparent lid of her coffin, she looked younger than sixteen years — younger, in fact, than she had looked in a long time, with her dark hair combed back from around the small pointed face and her eyes closed. Her hands were folded in front of her. She had, Gothrud told us, also wished some flowers to hold in them; and none

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of us could imagine where she had got such an idea until one of the younger children came forward with an illustration from our library's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, showing Snow White in *her* coffin with a bunch of flowers that never faded clasped in her hands. It was clear then, to some of us at least, that Juny had not been free from the dream of herself as a sort of captive — now sleeping — princess, merely putting in her time until the Prince her lover should arrive and carry her off.

But we had, of course, no flowers.

After she had been lowered into the grave and all of us had come up to look at her, Lydia Vewlan, Gothrud's wife and Colony Doctor as well as one of the Leaders, read some sort of service over her. Then, when all was finished, a cloth was laid over the transparent face of the plastic coffin and the earth was shoveled back. It had been dug out in chunks — a chunk to a spadeful; and the chunks had frozen in the bitter air, so that it was like piling angular rocks back upon the coffin, heavy purple rocks with the marblings of white shapes that were the embryos of strange plants frozen in hibernation. Because of their hard awkward shapes, they made quite a pile above the grave when they were all put back; and in fact it was not until the following summer was completely gone that the top of the grave was level again with the surrounding earth. By that time we had a small fence of white plastic pickets all around it; and it was part of the duty of the children in the colony to keep them scrubbed clean and free of the gray mold.

After the burial we all went back to the mess building for our noon meal. Outside, as we took our places at the tables, the midday wind sprang up and whistled around our metal huts and the stripped skeleton of the ship, standing apart at its distance on the landing spot and looking lonely and neglected in the bleak light from the white sky.

The Leaders of our Colony sat at the head of the file of tables that stretched the length of the mess hut. Their table was just large enough for the four of them and was set a little apart from the rest so that they could discuss important matters in relative privacy. The other, larger tables stretched away in order, with the ones at the far end with the small chairs and the low tops for the very young children — those who were just barely able to eat by themselves without supervision. These, the children, had as a group been unusually silent and solemn during the burial procedures, impressed by the emotions of their elders. But now, as they started to eat, their natural energy and exuberance began to break free of this restraint and show itself all the more noticeably for having been held down this long. In fact they began to pose quite a small discipli-

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nary problem, and this necessitating the attentions of their elders, a diversion was created, which together with the warmth and the good effect of the hot food, bred a lightening of spirits among us adults as well. Our natural mood of optimism, which the Colonial Office had required in selecting us for a place on the immigration rosters, pressed down before by the awareness of death in our midst, began to rise again. And it continued to rise, like a warm tide throughout the length of the Hut, until finally it reached the four who sat at the head table. But here it lapped unavailingly against the occupied minds of those who, twenty-four hours a day, breathed the constant atmosphere of responsibility for us all.

To talk and not be heard, they must lower their voices and lean their heads together. And this, while a perfectly natural action, had a tendency to impart an air of tenseness to their discussions. So they sat now, following the burial, in such an atmosphere of tenseness; and although the rest of us did not discover what they were then saying until long afterward — indeed until Maria Warna told us about it months later — there were those among us at the long tables who, glancing upward, noticed something perhaps graver than usual about their talking at that meal.

In particular, it had been Kurt Meklin — Kurt, with his old lined face thrust forward above his plate like some gray guardian of ancient privilege, who had been urging some point upon the other three all through the meal. But what it was, he had avoided stating openly, talking instead in half-hints, and obscure ambiguities, his black hard eyes sliding over to glance at Lydia, and then away again, and then back again. Until finally, when the last plates had been removed and the coffee served, Lydia rose at last to the challenge and spoke out unequivocally.

"All right, Kurt!" she said — she, the strong old woman, meeting the clever old man eye to eye. "You've been hinting and hawing around ever since we got back from the burying. Now, what's wrong with it?"

"Well, now that you ask me, Lydia," said Kurt. "It's a question — a question of what she died of."

Gothrud, who had sat the whole meal with his head hanging and eating almost nothing, now suddenly raised his eyes and looked across at Kurt.

"What kind of a question's that?" demanded Lydia. "You saw me enter it on the records — death from natural causes."

"I'll tell you what she really died of," said Gothrud, suddenly.

"Well now," said Kurt, interrupting Gothrud, and with another of his side-glances at Lydia. "Do you think that's sufficient?"

"Sufficient? Why shouldn't it be sufficient?"

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"Well now, of course, Lydia . . ." said Kurt. "I know nothing of doctoring myself, and we all know that the Colonial Office experts gave Our Planet a clean bill of health before they shipped our little colony out here. But I should think — just for the record, if nothing else — you'd have wanted to make an examination to determine the cause of death."

"I did."

"Naturally — but just a surface examination. Of course with the Colony in a sentimental mood about the girl — eh, Van?"

Van Meyer, the youngest of them all, was turning his coffee cup around and around between his thick fingers and staring at it. His heavy cheeks were slablike on either side of his mouth.

"Leave me out of it," he said, without looking up.

Lydia sniffed at him, and turned back to Kurt.

"Stop talking gibberish!" she commanded.

"Gibberish . . . sorry, Lydia," said Kurt. "I don't have the advantages of your medical education. A pharmacist really knows so little. But — it's just that I think you've left the record rather vague. *Natural causes* really doesn't tell us exactly what she died of."

"What she died of!" broke in Gothrud with sudden, low-voiced violence. "She died of a broken heart."

"Don't be a fool, Gothrud," said his wife, without looking at him. "And keep your voice down, you, Kurt. Do you want the whole Colony to hear? Now, out with it. You sat with us and agreed to bury her. If you had any questions, you should have come out with them then."

"But I had to bend to the sentimentality of the Colony," said Kurt. "It was best to let it go then. Later, I thought, later we can . . ." He fell silent, making a small, expressive gesture with his hand.

"Later we can do *what?*" grated Lydia.

"Why, I should think that naturally — as a matter of record — that in a case like this you'd want to do an autopsy on her."

"Autopsy!" The word jolted a little from Lydia's lips.

"Why, certainly," said Kurt, spreading his hands. "This way is much simpler than insisting on it in open Assembly. After curfew tonight, when everybody is in barracks —"

A low strangled cry from Gothrud interrupted him. From the moment in which the word *autopsy* had left Kurt's lips, he had been sitting in frozen horror. Now, it seemed, he managed at last to draw breath into his lungs to speak with.

"Autopsy!" he cried, in a thin, tearing, half-strangled whisper. "*Autopsy!* She didn't want to be touched! We agreed not to burn her; and now you'd — No —"

"Why, Gothrud —" said Kurt.

"Don't *why Gothrud* me!" said

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Gothrud, his deep sunk eyes at last flaming into violence. "A decision's been made by the Colony. And none of you are going to set it aside."

"We are the Leaders," said Kurt.

"Leaders!" Gothrud laughed bitterly. "The ex-druggist — you, Kurt. The ex-nurse and —" he glanced at Van Meyer — "the ex-caterer's son, the ex-nothing."

Van Meyer held his cup and stared at it.

"And the ex-high school teacher," said Kurt, softly.

"Exactly!" said Gothrud, lifting his head to meet him stare for stare. "The ex-high school teacher. Me. As little an ex as the rest of you, Kurt, and as big a Leader right now. And a Leader that says you've got no right to touch Juny to settle your two-bit intriguing and feed your egos —" He choked.

"Gothrud —" said Kurt. "Gothrud, you're overwrought. You —"

Gothrud coughed raspingly and went on. "I tell you —" He choked again, and had to stop.

Lydia spoke swiftly to him, in low, furious German. "Shut up! Will you kill yourself, old man?"

"That's being done for me," Gothrud answered her in English, and faced up to Kurt again. "You hear me!" he said. "We're nothings. Leaders. Great executives. Only none of us has been five miles from the landing spot. Only none of us organized this Colony. None of us flew the ship, or assigned the work, or built the huts, or planned the plantings. All we did was sign the roster back on Earth, and polite young experts with twice our brains did it all for us. By what right are we leaders?"

"We were elected!" snapped Kurt.

"Fools elected by fools!" Gothrud's head was beginning to swim from the violence of his effort in the argument. Through a gathering mist, he seemed to see Kurt's face ripple as if it was under water, and rippling, sneer at him. With a great effort, he gripped the edge of the table and went on.

"I tell you," he rasped, "that people have rights. That you won't — that you can't — that —"

His tongue had suddenly gone stubborn and refused to obey him. It rattled unintelligibly in his mouth and around him the room was being obscured by the white mist. Gothrud felt a sudden constriction in his throat; and, gasping abruptly for breath, he pushed back his chair and tried to stand up, clawing at his collar to loosen it.

Through the black specks that swarmed suddenly before his eyes, he was conscious of Van Meyer rising beside him and of Lydia's voice ordering the younger man to catch him before he fell.

"Come on, Gothrud," said the voice of Van Meyer, close to his ear. "You've been under too much of a strain. You better lie down. Come on, I'll help you."

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Through the haze he was conscious of being half-assisted, half-carried from the dining room. There was a short space of confusion, and then things cleared for him, to allow him to find himself lying on his bunk in the room he shared with Lydia. Van Meyer, alone with him, stood over the washstand, filling a hypodermic syringe from a small frosted bottle of minimal, his gross bulk hunched over concentratedly with a sort of awkward and pathetic kindness.

"Feeling better?" he asked Gothrud.

"I'm all right," Gothrud answered. But the words came out thick and unnaturally. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to give you a shot to make you sleep," said Van.

"Van —" said Gothrud. "Van —" Talking was really a tremendous effort. He swallowed desperately and went on. "*You* understand about Juny — don't you?"

"Why, yes, Gothrud."

"She shouldn't have come, you see. We made her — because she had no other family, Lydia and I. She never wanted to come. We talked her into it. She was just coming out of being a child —"

"Don't talk, Gothrud," said Van, struggling with the delicate plunger of the hypodermic. "You need to rest."

"— She was the only one that age. All the rest of us, adults or young children; and her in between, all alone. A whole lost generation, Van, in one lonely little girl."

"Now, Gothrud —"

"I tell you," cried Gothrud, struggling up onto one elbow, "we robbed her of every reason to live. She should have had love and fun and the company of young people her own age back on Earth. And we brought her here — to this desolate outpost of a world —"

Van Meyer had finally got the syringe properly filled. He came over to the bed with it and reached for Gothrud's arm when the older man sank back.

"That's why we owe it to her to leave her untouched the way she wanted," said Gothrud, in a low, feverish voice, as the needle went in. "But it's not that so much, Van. If it were for some good purpose, I wouldn't object. But it isn't. It's for Lydia — and Kurt. Van —" He grasped the younger man's arm as he started to turn away from the bunk, and held him, compelling Van Meyer to turn back.

"Van —" he said. "Things are going wrong here. You know that. It's Lydia. Married all those years back on Earth, and I never let myself see it. I watched her drive our son and daughter from our house. I watched her bend Juny to her way and bring her here with us. And Van —" his voice sunk to a whisper — "I never let myself see it until I got here, that awful hunger in her. It's power, she wants, Van, power. That's what she's always

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wanted, and now she sees a chance of getting it. Listen to me, Van, watch out for her. She did for Juny. It'll be me next, and then Kurt, and then —"

"Now, Gothrud — now just relax —" said Van, pulling his arm at last free from the older man's grasp, which now began to weaken as the drug took hold.

"Promise me you'll watch. . . ." whispered Gothrud. "You must. I trust you, Van. You're weak, but there's nothing rotten in you. Kurt's no good. He's another like Lydia. Watch them. Promise — promise. . . ."

"I — I promise," said Van, and the minimal came in on Gothrud with a rush, like a great black wave that swept in and over him, burying him far beneath it, deep, and deep.

When Gothrud awoke, the room he shared with Lydia was in darkness; and through the single small, high window in the outer wall, with its reinforcing wire mesh patterning the glass, he saw the night sky — for a wonder momentarily free of clouds — and the bright stars of the Cluster. Van Meyer's shot of minimal must have been a light one, for he had awakened clear-headed and, he felt quite sure, long before it had been planned for him to awaken. He felt positive in his own mind that they would have planned for him to sleep until morning; and only the unpredictable clock of his old body, ticking erratically, now fast and now slowing, running down toward final silence, had tricked them.

The illuminated clock-face on his bedside table read 21:20 and curfew was at 2100 hours. He fumbled into his clothes, got up, went over to the window and peered out, craning his neck. Yes, the Colony was now completely lost in darkness, except for the small, yellow-gleaming windows of the Office Hut. Feverishly he turned and began to climb into his weather suit, struggling hastily into the bulky, overall-like outfit, zipping it tight and pulling the hood over his head. At the last minute, as he was going out the door, he remembered the diary; and, going back, dug through the contents of his locker until his fingers closed over the cylindrical thickness of it. He lifted it out, a faint hint of clean, light, young-girl's perfume reaching him from it momentarily. Then he stuffed it through the slit of his weather suit to an inside pocket; and went out the door.

The most direct route to the Office Hut led across the open compound. But as he started across this, leaning against the wind, an obscure fear made his feet turn away from the direct bulk of his destination and veer in the direction of the new grave. He went, chiding himself for his foolishness all the way, for although he knew now that the other three Leaders had held him in secret

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contempt for a long time, he was equally sure that they would not dare go directly against his wishes in this matter without consulting him.

So it was that when he came finally to Juny's grave and saw it gaping black and open under the stars, he could not at first bring himself to believe it. But when he did, all the strength went out of him and he fell on his knees beside the open trench. For a wild moment as he knelt there, he felt that, like a figure out of the Old Testament, he should pray — for guidance, or for a divine vengeance upon the desecrators of the grave of his grandchild. But all that came out of him were the crying reproaches of an old man: "Oh, God, why didn't you make me stronger? Why didn't you make me young again when this whole business of immigration was started? I could take a gun and —"

But he knew he would not take a gun; and if he did, the others would simply walk up and take it away from him. Because he could not shoot anybody. Not even for Juny could he shoot anybody. And after a while he wiped his eyes and got to his feet and went on toward the Office Hut, hugging one arm to his side, so that he could feel the round shape of the diary through all his heavy suit insulation.

When he came to the Office Hut, the door was locked. But he had his key in his pocket as always. His heart pounded and the entryway of the Hut seemed full of a soft mist lurking just at the edge of his vision. He leaned against the wall for a moment to rest, then painfully struggled out of his weather suit. When he had hung it up beside the others on the wall hooks, he opened the inner door of the Hut and went in.

The three were clustered around the long conference table at the far end of the office, Lydia with her dark old face looking darker and older even than usual above the white gown and gloves of surgery. They looked up at the sound of the opening door; and Van Meyer moved swiftly to block off Gothrud's vision of the table and came toward him.

"Gothrud!" he said. "What are you doing here?" And he put his hands on Gothrud's arms.

Gothrud struggled feebly to release himself and go around the younger man to the table, but was not strong enough.

"Let me go. Let me go!" he cried. "What have you done to her? Have you —"

"No, no," soothed Van Meyer. Still holding Gothrud's arms, he steered the older man over to a chair at one of the desks and sat him down in it. All the way across the room, he stayed between Gothrud and the conference table and when he had Gothrud in the chair, he pulled up another for himself and sat down opposite, so that the

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table was still hidden. Kurt and Lydia came over to stand behind him. All three looked at Gothrud.

Lydia's face was hard and bitter as jagged ice. The absorbent face mask around her neck, unfastened on one side and hanging by a single thread, somehow made her look, to Gothrud's eyes, not like a member of the profession of healing, but like some executioner, interrupted in the course of her duty.

"You!" she said.

Gothrud stared up at her, feeling a helpless fascination.

"You — you mustn't — " he gasped.

"*Du!*" she broke out at him suddenly, in low voiced, furious German. "You old fool! Couldn't you stay in bed and keep out of trouble? Don't I have enough trouble on my hands with this one-time pill-peddler trying to undermine my authority, but I must suffer with you as well?"

"Lydia," he answered hoarsely, in the same language. "You can't do this thing. You mustn't let Kurt push you into it. It's a crime before God and man that you should even consider it."

"I consider — I consider the Colony."

"No. You do not. You do not!" cried Gothrud in agony. "You think only of yourself. What harm will it do you if you tell the truth? It can't alter the facts. The Colony will be upset for a little while, but then they will get over it. Isn't that better than living a lie and backing it up with an act of abomination?"

"Be silent!" snapped Lydia. "What I am doing, I am doing for the best of all concerned."

"I won't let you!" he cried. Changing swiftly into English, he swung away from her and appealed to the two men.

"Listen," he said. "Listen: you know there's no need for this — this autopsy. Colonial Office experts, men who *know*, certified this planet as clean. So it can't be any disease. And what would it benefit you to discover some physical frailty?"

"Ah? She was frail?" asked Kurt. "Something in the family?"

"No, she was not!" Lydia almost shouted. "Stop playing the goose, Kurt." Suddenly regaining control of herself, she dropped her voice all at once to normal level again. "I'm surprised at you, Kurt, letting yourself be misled by a sick old man who never was able to look on the girl dispassionately."

"Dispassionately!" cried Gothrud, straining forward against Van Meyer's prisoning hands. "Did you look at Juny dispassionately? Did you bring her along to die out here, dispassionately, taking her away from everything that she longed for? I tell you — *I* tell you, she died of a broken heart! God —" He choked suddenly. "God forgive me for being so soft, so weak and flabby-soft that I let you have your way about her coming. Better an orphanage back on Earth, for her. Better the

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worst possible life, alive, back there, than this — to have her dead, so young, and wasted — wasted —"

He sobbed suddenly.

"Van," commanded Lydia, evenly, "take him back to Quarters."

"No!" shouted Gothrud, coming suddenly to his feet and with surprising strength pushing the younger man aside, so that he half-toppled in his chair and caught at a desk to keep from falling. Gothrud took two quick strides across to a recorder that perched on a nearby desk. Pulling the diary from his pocket, he snapped it onto the spindle and turned the playback on.

"She died of a broken heart — for all she wanted and couldn't have," cried Gothrud. "And here's your proof. Listen!"

"What are you doing?" snapped Kurt.

Gothrud turned blazing eyes upon him.

"This was her diary," he said. "Listen. . . ."

The speaker had begun to murmur words in the voice of a young girl. Gothrud reached out and turned up the volume. The sweet clear tones grew into words in the still air of the grim rectangular office, all plastic and metal about the four who listened.

". . . *and after that we flew out over Lake Michigan. The lake was all dark, but you could see the moon lighting a path on the water, all white and wonderful. And the lights went up the shore for miles. I just put my head on Davy's shoulder . . .*"

"Shut it off!" snapped Kurt, suddenly. "What are you trying to do, Gothrud?"

"Listen to her heart breaking," said Gothrud, his head a little on one side, attentively. "Listen and try to think of her dispassionately."

"You're out of your head, Gothrud!" said Lydia. "What odds is it, what the girl recorded back on Earth?"

"On Earth? On Earth?" echoed Gothrud. "She recorded it here, night by night, in her own room."

Before them the diary fell silent for a second and then took up with a new entry.

". . . *Month eight, fourth day: Today Walter took me to the Embassy ball. I wore my new formal all made out of yards and yards of real night-mist lace. It was like walking in the center of a pink cloud. Walter has the high emotional index typical of such intense characters; and he was very jealous of me. He was afraid that I might take it into my head to turn around and go back to Our Planet and the Colony. I let him worry for a little while, before I explained that I can never, never go back because of a clause the studio put in my contract that says I am not allowed to leave the Earth without studio permission which they will never give. And since I'm signed up with them for years and years . . .*"

Lydia's hand came down like a chopping knife on the cut-off, killing Juny's voice in mid-sentence.

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"That's enough of that," she said. "Van, take him out."

"You heard," said Gothrud, staring at the two men. Van hesitated.

"Go on, Van!" snapped Lydia. Reluctantly, Van moved forward.

"Kurt —" cried Gothrud.

"It's up to Lydia," replied the druggist, tonelessly.

"Then we'll go ahead," said Lydia decisively, turning away.

"No, by heaven, you won't!" shouted Gothrud, fending off Van and taking a step forward. At the motion, the sudden familiar wave of dizziness swept over him, so that he staggered and was forced to cling to a nearby chair for support.

"All right," he said, fighting to clear his head. "If you won't stop — if you really won't stop — then I'll tell you. Lydia has no right. Lydia —"

"Be silent!" shouted Lydia in German, suddenly halting and wheeling about, her face deadly.

"No," said Gothrud in English. "No. Not any more. Listen, Kurt — and you too, Van. You know what kind of doctor Lydia is. A fourteen-day wonder. She was a registered nurse and the Colonial Office sent her to school for two weeks and gave her a medical diploma." He looked straight at Lydia, who stood frozen, her mouth half open in an angry gape and her hands fisted by her side. "What you don't know, and what I've kept to myself all this time is that the diploma means nothing. Nothing."

"What's this?" said Kurt.

Gothrud laughed, chokingly.

"As if you haven't suspected, Kurt. Don't think I don't know why you suggested this autopsy. But all you had were suspicions. I know. I was at the school with her."

"I suspected nothing —"

Gothrud laughed, hoarsely.

"Then you're a fool, Kurt. Who believes that a doctor can be made in two weeks when it takes eight years back on Earth? A two-week doctor would be prosecuted on Earth. But we little people who go out to colonize take what we can bring along with us. Us with our nurse-doctors, our druggist-Leaders, our handyman-engineers. Yes. Do you know what they taught us in those two weeks, Kurt — except that I didn't get a diploma for my part in it? Lydia learned how to attempt a forceps delivery, an appendectomy, and a tonsillectomy. They taught her the rudiments of setting broken bones and the proper methods for prescribing some two hundred common drugs."

He was still looking at Lydia as he spoke. She still had not moved, and her hands were still clenched, but her face had taken on an expression of complete serenity.

"This," said Gothrud, staring at her. "This woman who has never held a scalpel in her hand in her life before is the trained specialist that you are expecting to make a professional examination of Juny's body."

Kurt turned to face Lydia.

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"Lydia," he said. "Lydia, is this true?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Kurt," replied Lydia, calmly. "He's lying of course."

"How do we know it's not you who are lying?"

"Because I'm in complete control of my faculties. Gothrud's senile."

"Senile?" said Van.

"Of course. The first signs showed up in him some time back. I was hoping it would come on more slowly; but you've all noticed these fainting fits of his, and how he gets wrought up over every little thing. Poor Gothrud," she said, looking at him.

He stared back at her, so aghast at the depths of her perfidy that he could not even bring himself to speak.

"He's made this all up, of course," she went on. "The method by which I was trained was naturally top secret. I've been sworn to silence, of course, but I can tell you that the required information is fed directly to the brain. It's such a new and revolutionary method that it's being restricted to highly important Government Service, such as training key colonists like myself. That explains why the ordinary medical colleges don't know about it yet."

"Lydia," said Kurt. "You say this is true? You swear it's true? How can you prove it?"

"Proof?" she said airily. "Watch me do the autopsy."

Kurt's old eyelids closed down over his eyes until he seemed to look out through a narrow slit.

"All right, Lydia," he said. "That's just what we'll do."

A wordless cry broke from the lips of Gothrud. He snatched up a chair and took one step toward Lydia. Instantly Van Meyer jumped forward and caught him. Frantically, the old man struggled, his breath coming in short terrible gasps.

"Hold him, Van, while I give him a sedative!" cried Lydia — but before she could reach the hypodermic kit on the table across the room, Gothrud suddenly stopped struggling and stiffened. His eyes rolled upward until only the whites showed, for just a second before the lids dropped down over them. He sagged bonelessly. And Van Meyer, lowering him into a chair, snatched back his hands in horror, as if they had suddenly become covered with blood. But Lydia brusquely came across the room, pushed him aside, and bent over the motionless figure.

She took its pulse and rolled one eyelid back momentarily.

"That's all right," she said, stepping back. "Leave him alone. It's easier this way. Come on back to the table with me, both of you, I'll need your assistance."

But for a second, yet, she herself did not move; instead, standing, she stared down at the man she had lived with for more than 50 years. There was a particular glitter in her eye.

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"Poor Gothrud," she said softly.

She turned away crisply and led the way back to the conference table, re-tying her face mask as she went.

"Stand over there, Kurt," she said. "You, Van, hand me that scalpel. That one, there." Her eyes jumped at him, as he hesitated. "Move, man! It's only a body."

They went to work. When Lydia was about half through, Gothrud came to himself a little in the chair and called out in a dazed voice to ask what they were doing.

"Don't answer," muttered Lydia, bent above her work. "Pay no attention to him."

They did not answer Gothrud. After a little while he called out again. And when they did not answer this time, either, he subsided in his chair and sat talking to himself and crying a little.

It was an unpleasant job. Van Meyer felt sick; but Kurt went about his duties without emotion, and Lydia was industriously and almost cheerfully busy about her part of it.

"Well," she said, at last. "Just as I suspected — nothing."

She untied her mask and frankly wiped a face upon which perspiration gleamed.

"Wrap her up," she said. "And then you can take her back out again." She glanced over to where her husband was. He had stopped talking to himself and was sitting up, staring at them with bright eyes. "Well, how are you, Gothrud?"

Gothrud did not answer, although he looked directly at her; and Van Meyer, standing beside her, stirred uncomfortably. Kurt sat down on a desk opposite her and mopped his face with a tissue. He produced one of the Colony's few remaining cigarets and lighted it.

"And you didn't find anything?" he said sharply to Lydia.

She transferred her gaze from Gothrud to him.

"Not a thing," she said.

Kurt blinked his eyes and turned his head away. But Van Meyer continued to stare at her, uneasily and curiously.

"Lydia," he asked.

"What, Van?"

"What was it, then?"

"What was what?"

"I mean," he said. "Now that you've . . . seen her, what was it that made her die?"

"Nothing made her die," replied Lydia. "She just died. If I'm to write a more extensive report, I'll put down that death was due to heart failure — with general debility as a contributing factor."

In the silence that fell between them, the single word came sharp and clear from the old man seated across the room.

"Heart," said Gothrud.

"Yes," said Lydia, turning once more to face him. "If it makes you feel any better, Gothrud, it was her heart that killed her."

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"Yes," repeated Gothrud. "Yes, her poor heart. Her heart that none of you understood. Lydia —"

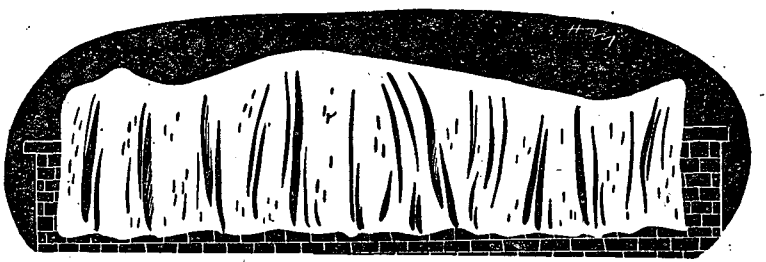
"What?" she demanded sharply.

He stretched out his arms to her, his wrinkled fingers cupped and trembling.

"Her heart," he said. "Lydia. Give me the broken pieces."

The next day Gothrud was very weak and could not leave his bed. For three days Lydia looked after him alone; but it turned out to take too much of her time from the duties required of her by her Colony positions, and on the fourth day they brought in Maria Warna from the unmarried women's barracks to stay with him and take care of him. And during the next few weeks he rambled a good deal in his talk, so that, one way or another, he told Maria everything. And eventually, later, she told it to the rest of us. But that was a long time after when things were different.

Gothrud lingered for a few days more than three weeks and finally died. He was cremated, as was everyone else who died after that. That was the same week that the last of the tobacco and cigarets were used up; and those of us who smoked had a hard time getting used to doing without them.



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This is not an introduction, but a farewell; Elisabeth Sanxay Holding died in New York on February 8 of this year at the age of 65. She had been writing successfully for 30 years, beginning in the field of the romantic novel and going on to create, starting in 1929, a series of psychological suspense stories of murder, so far ahead of their times in delicacy and depth that she may almost be said to have created the modern murder novel. THE OBSTINATE MURDERER *(1938),* LADY KILLER *(1942) and* THE VIRGIN HUNTRESS *(1951) deserve your particular attention, though all of her novels are rewarding. Mrs. Holding's mysteries are singularly realistic, but she could write imaginatively too — as in her excellent and recently reissued juvenile story of a talking cat,* MISS KELLY *(see this month's* Recommended Reading*), and in her too few tales of fantasy* (Friday the Nineteenth, *F&SF, Summer, 1950) and science fiction* (Shadow of Wings, *F&SF, July, 1954). Here, to my sorrow, is the last original Holding which we shall have the privilege of publishing — an eerie tale of babysitting, murder and a different kind of ghost.*

The Strange Children

by ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING

MARJORIE SMITH SAT UP VERY straight in the car. When they swerved sharply round a corner, it sent her lurching against the side wall; when they made a sudden stop, it jerked her forward.

And it seemed to her that this was as it should be. Her blue corduroy raincoat was bulky, the collar rubbed her chin, and to her stern young conscience, this was right. Right and fitting to be uncomfortable, when you were doing something that you knew was wrong.

It *is* wrong, she told herself. I've always said I'd never do it. Never go to sit with children I hadn't met. It's not fair to them, or to yourself. If anything goes wrong, if they wake up, and call, it's a shock for them to see a complete stranger. And you can't do your best for them, if you don't know them at all.

But this Mrs. Jepson had been so insistent on the telephone, a few hours ago. Do *please* help us out, Miss Smith! We're more or less obliged to go to this thing at the

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Country Club; we engaged a table there, and invited these people to a late supper ages ago. And Katie, the maid who's been with us for years, was suddenly called away to a sick sister. Do, please, manage it somehow, Miss Smith! I've heard such wonderful things about you from Myra Williams. At half past 8?

I'd like to come earlier, to meet the children before they go to bed, Marjorie had said. But, my dear, the chauffeur's gone on an errand. I couldn't send the car for you until 8. I'll take a taxi, Marjorie had said. But, my dear, it's not *necessary!* Mrs. Jepson had cried. It's a perfect maelstrom here, without Katie. I'll have to get some sort of dinner for my husband and myself, and then we'll have to dress. . . . Really, it's not necessary. The children *never* wake up at night.

You never know when they may, though, Marjorie had said. And if there was a stranger there . . . My dear! Mrs. Jepson had said, my children don't mind strangers the least bit! They're the friendliest children — almost *too* friendly, I sometimes think.

And then she had said, Miss Smith, my husband and I both realize how bothering this is for you. Being asked at the last moment, and such a bitter cold night, and not knowing us, and so on. We're going to make out a check for twenty-five dollars —

No, thank you! Marjorie had said. It will be my usual rate. If I come. Oh, well! We can argue about that later, Mrs. Jepson had said. There are stacks of new books here, my dear, and magazines, and Katie's left all sorts of things in the icebox — cold chicken, and chocolate cake, and salad . . .

Then she must have realized that she was off on the wrong track, and getting nowhere. The chauffeur says he can get this woman he knows, she had gone on. But I've seen her once, and I hate the idea of leaving the children with her. I'm quite sure she drinks — and suppose she set the place on fire, with a cigarette? That's always my great terror. Do, please, manage to come, Miss Smith, so that I won't have to get that woman.

I was a fool to say yes, Marjorie told herself. This woman who drinks might very well be just an invention of Mrs. Jepson's, to get me there. But if she wasn't an invention then I don't think much of this Mrs. Jepson. No matter how important her engagement was, to leave her little children with someone she didn't trust . . .

But people do things like that. You read about them in the newspapers. If I do decide to marry Johnny, and we have children of our own, I don't see how I could ever bear to leave them with anyone, unless it was Mother, or my own sister, or some old friend. . . . Because — I like children.

The car turned off the highway into a side road that seemed to

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plunge into a forest, black and frozen. The bare trees creaked in the wind; here and there stood a big old house, some with a light in a window, some in darkness. I suppose it's mostly a summer place, Marjorie thought. They always look rather forlorn in the winter.

Then, as they turned a corner, she saw ahead of them a bungalow, brightly lighted, trim and cheerful as a little launch in a harbor among grim old freighters. The car stopped; the chauffeur, who had not said one word, had not once turned his head, jumped out nimbly and opened the door of the car. Marjorie got out, went along the path and up the two shallow steps to the veranda. I'm glad the house is like this. It's cosy.

She rang the bell, and the door was opened almost at once by a big, heavy man in shirt-sleeves and braces.

"Miss Smith?" he said. "I'm Jepson. Carl Jepson. This is very good of you. Very good."

His big shoulders sloped, his arms hung down in front of him, giving him a clumsy air. He was handsome, after a fashion, with butter-colored hair slick on his skull, good features, but marred by a curious expression of unhappy and almost stupid confusion. He looked at Marjorie, his light brows drawn together.

"You're very young . . ." he said, in a loud tone.

"I'm twenty-two," she said, a little nettled at what she thought a criticism. "And I've had quite a lot of experience with children."

"Ralph, *darling!*" cried a gay, clear voice. "Let poor Miss Smith come in and get her coat off, do!"

It was the voice Marjorie had heard on the telephone that afternoon, a lovely and a very persuasive voice. And Mrs. Jepson herself was like that: dark-eyed, slender and tall, she persuaded you with a glance that she was your friend, your well-wisher, that you would be happy in her company. She wore a black dinner dress, a necklace of shining silver leaves and earrings to match, and she was charming.

"Ralph, darling, hurry up and finish dressing!" she said. "While I brief Miss Smith." She raised her arms in a gesture of shoving him away, and led Marjorie into the long, softly lit sitting room. "It's a weird little house," she said. "The children's rooms are down here — those two doors. And here's their bathroom. And here's the kitchen. You'll find lots of things in the icebox; just please take anything you like. And there's a radio, and a television, and a phonograph, and stacks of records. And don't worry about waking the children. *Nothing* bothers them. And here are books, and magazines, and cigarettes. And here's the telephone number where you can reach us, and the doctor's number. Will you be all right?"

"Yes, thank you," said Marjorie, a little stiffly. For, in her New England fashion, she found Mrs. Jepson a little too nice, too eager. "And the children's names?"

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"There's Ronald; he's seven, and Jean, five. We won't be very late, Miss Smith. *Au revoir!*"

When she had gone, and the door closed after her, it was as if some fresh breeze had suddenly died, leaving the air stagnant; the little house was very still. The wind blew against the windows; an electric clock ticked, with a sort of purr; the refrigerator buzzed and whirred for a moment, and then was silent.

Ronald and Jean, Marjorie said to herself. Two little children here, in my care, and I've never seen them. If they don't wake up, I suppose I'll go home without having seen them, and they'll never know I've been here. I don't like it.

She took up a magazine, but she could not read. She was waiting. For the sound of a car going by outside, for the telephone to ring, for the icebox to start up again? For a board to creak, for a tap to drip, for a rustle, a sign? But there was only the wind, and the rain outside.

And then she heard it, a sound that should not frighten anyone: a low chuckle of laughter. It's one of the children, she thought. Still asleep, probably. And then a soft murmur, another soft laugh. She rose, and as she stood by the chair, she heard the patter of bare feet running. They're up, she thought. I'll have to see.

She went to the nearest door and turned the handle gently. But the door was locked. She tried the next one, and that, too, was locked. She knocked.

"I'm Marjorie Smith," she said. "I've come to see you. Open the door, will you?"

"No, thank you!" answered a little boy's voice, very resolute. "Go away, please."

"Go away!" echoed a little girl's voice.

"I just want to come in and say good-evening —"

"No, thank you!" said the little boy. "We *never* let *anybody* come in at night, *never*."

"Just for a moment."

"Go away!" cried the little girl.

Marjorie stooped, and looked through the keyhole. The light was on in there; she could see a pink wall, a bed on which a little fair-haired girl in a blue dressing gown was sitting beside a dark-haired young man in a gray suit.

"Let me in!" she called, knocking more loudly.

"Go away!" said the little boy.

The young man in there said nothing, did not stir. I'm afraid! Marjorie thought. Who is he? What is he doing there? How did he get in? *I'm afraid.*

All right! Be afraid, then. It doesn't matter. Those children are in my care, and I'm going to get into that room. I'm going to find out who that man is. And I'm going to get rid of him.

She put on her raincoat; she fixed the front door on the latch and left it held ajar by a telephone book. Better to let the house grow chill than for her to take any chances of

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being shut out, away from the children.

The cold caught her by the throat, took her breath away. If only the house next door had one lighted window; if only there were some sound from the street, a car going by, a radio; if only there were someone . . .

The light from the children's room shone across the gravel path; she went close to it, and looked in. A dark little boy in a plaid dressing gown sat on the floor, hands clasped round his knees; the little girl still sat on the bed, and now the young man had his arm about her shoulders. Both the children were looking up into his face; they were listening to him.

With an effort, Marjorie pushed up the window from the bottom.

"Who are you?" she cried.

He turned his head and looked at her, with desperate, dark eyes. And then he was gone. He had not risen, or moved, but he was gone.

For a moment she held tight to the window sill, and it seemed to her that the wind went roaring through her head, so that she could see nothing, hear nothing. But the little girl's voice came to her, high and wild.

"Georgie! Georgie! Come back! Come back, Georgie!"

She climbed in over the sill; she stood in the room, dripping wet, her hair blown across her forehead.

"That's a fine way to treat me!" she said, laughing. "The very first time I come to see you, too. Making me go out in the pouring rain and climb in the window."

She had struck the right note.

"Well, you see," the little boy said, "Georgie won't stay if anybody else comes. Even Mommie. He doesn't want *any*body to see him but us."

"Katie sawed him, and she went away," said the little girl.

"Do you like him?" Marjorie asked.

They both looked at her, surprised, wondering.

"We like him the *best*," said Ronald. "He tells us stories, and he sings songs."

"And he stays here in the dark, too," said the little girl. "You go away now, and he'll come back."

"I can't go away," said Marjorie. "I promised your mommie I'd stay with you till she came home."

"We'd rather have Georgie, thank you," said Ronald.

"Some other time," said Marjorie. "I thought we'd all go out to the kitchen, and make some cocoa, have a little party."

It was nearly two hours before she could get them back to sleep. She made cocoa for them, and toast; she read to them, she played the phonograph records they wanted; she told them stories. They were, she thought, unusually attractive children, intelligent, reasonable, mannerly, and the little girl was beautiful, with great dark eyes and thick fair hair, as fine as silk. But they were, both of

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them, curiously tense and excited; again and again they would turn their heads, they would look, they would listen.

"I thought it was Georgie," the little girl said.

Marjorie ignored that. She asked them no questions; she tried, in every way she could, to distract their attention from Georgie, to quiet them. When they had fallen asleep, she opened both their doors, and sat down in the living room. I got chilled when I went out, she told herself. That's why I'm so cold. The heat's not very good in this house. It's — there seems to be a draft somewhere. A very cold draft.

Almost all children invent imaginary playmates who seem absolutely real to them. When they're pretending they're one of these imaginary creatures, their voices change, and their expressions. If *they* feel absolutely sure they see one of those imaginary creatures, it might . . . Thought-transference? People can be made to believe they've seen things, and heard things. . . .

No, I did see him. I did hear him. And he — vanished. Is it my duty to tell Mrs. Jepson? Oh, how *can* I?

"Please don't be frightened," he said. "I'd very much like to come and talk to you for a few moments, but if you'd rather I didn't, I'll stay away."

The comfortable lamp-lit room was empty, but the voice was near.

"Where — are you?" she asked.

"I'll clear out, if you'd rather."

"*Where are you?*" she demanded, so loudly that she felt a sudden worry about waking the children.

"Well, I'm here," he said. "If you want to see me, I can fix it. But if you don't —"

She was silent for a moment, trying not to breathe so fast, so loudly.

"Yes. I do want to see you," she said.

Then he was there, standing at the other side of the table. He was young, and he was handsome, in a way, but his gray suit was shabby, and he looked tired to exhaustion, his dark eyes hollow.

"Who — are you?" she asked.

"My name is George Stewart," he said. "Or it was. But, you see. . . . It's hard to explain. . . . You see, I was murdered five years ago."

"No!" Marjorie said. "Things like that — aren't true."

"I didn't believe things like this, myself," he said, "until it happened to me. It's — you can't think how bad it is."

"Then why do you do them? Why do you — come back?"

"Well . . ." he said, in his gentle, tired voice, "we don't 'come back,' you know. We've never been able to get away. When you've been murdered, when you die — *at the wrong time* — you're caught here in this world."

"You mean — you're alive?"

"No," he said. "Not alive. And not dead."

"I don't understand," she said curtly.

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"I don't think anyone does, quite," he said. "Some of the others like me have worked out theories —"

"You mean other ghosts?" she asked, and because of the dreadful confusion within her, she spoke in a scornful, sneering tone she had never used before in her life.

"That's what you call us," he said. "I've gone to see others I've heard about, in England, Ireland, Hungary. They'd all been murdered, even though sometimes it wasn't suspected. And one woman who'd been in a castle in Ireland for four hundred years told me it was because if you're murdered, it's not the *right time* for you to die. So that you *can't* die. You can't go on to the next world."

"And what's the 'right time' to die, may I ask?"

"This woman believed it was all predestined. You're born, she thought, with a natural life-span, whether it's one day, or ninety years, depending upon the constitution you've inherited. Your inherited constitution will determine what diseases you'll avoid, and what ones will finish you."

"What about accidents?"

"She thought they were predestined, too. And it's true that if you go to a place where there's been some great disaster, a flood, a volcanic eruption, a train-wreck, anything of that sort, no ghosts have ever been heard of there. No. It's only murder that makes us — as we are. Because murder, she said, doesn't *have to* happen. Nobody is born destined to be murdered, because nobody is born obliged to become a murderer."

"So if you've been murdered, you stay on earth, and try to hurt and terrify people?"

"I've never found a genuine case of anyone's being really hurt by a ghost," he said, with a faint sigh. "If people are terrified at the sight of us, that's not our fault. We go on and on, in a sort of despair, and nobody will listen to us, nobody will help."

"Why do they want people to listen to them? What sort of help do they want?"

"We want to be killed," he said.

"But you *have* been killed!"

"No," he said. "It wasn't the right time for us to die, so we couldn't."

"And when is this 'right time' supposed to come again?"

"Any time after we're murdered," he said. "We're ready then. Our life here is finished. We're longing, every minute, to get out of this world, and on to the next one."

"Well? Can't ghosts kill themselves?"

"I don't know," he said. "But they never do. They never even try. It's — I couldn't tell you how bad — how shocking the idea seems to us: No. We wait. We feel we *must* wait. Until we're taken."

"What do you mean by 'taken'?"

"We're killed," he explained, earnest and patient. "A building col-

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lapses, there's a stroke of lightning, a fire; in the war, some of us were killed by bombs. But often it's a long time. Such a long time . . . That's why we're always looking for someone who'll be merciful enough to set us free. Even to listen to us, as you're listening to me."

"Why should the murdered people, the victims, be punished, and not the murderers?" she demanded.

"I don't know what happens to the murderers," he said. "But I'm certain that our waiting isn't meant as a punishment. I suppose —" He paused for a moment. "I suppose," he went on, "that if life is eternal, one hundred years, five hundred years, of waiting hasn't much significance. The way I see it, it's part of a plan, an order of things that we can't grasp. But . . . If you'll help me . . . If I give you the gun . . ."

"No! I couldn't! I couldn't! What happened to you, to turn you — into this?"

"Nella killed me," he said, casually.

"Nella?"

"Mrs. Jepson."

"*What!* What are you saying?"

"I was her lover," he said. "I suppose that's the word for it. Anyhow, that autumn, five years ago, she was sure Jepson suspected what was going on, and she wanted to get rid of me. She tried to bribe me — with Jepson's money — to go away somewhere. When I wouldn't do that, she got into a panic. She believed I was going to make a scandal, ruin her, make her lose Jepson's money, her social position, everything she valued."

"Were you going to do that?"

"No," he answered, simply. "I've never been like that. Never wanted to injure anyone. But she couldn't believe that; literally *couldn't*. She thought everybody was vindictive — and dangerous. She asked me to talk things over with her, and we drove in her car up to the lake. She was very quiet and serious; more reasonable, I thought. She'd brought along some drinks in a thermos, and she poured out one for each of us. I don't know how she managed it, but mine was poisoned. I wasn't watching her, particularly. I was smoking. I was looking out at the lake, at the autumn leaves floating on it. I was starting to tell her, once more, that she needn't worry, but that I wasn't going to give up my job here, my friends, everything, and go to Seattle, as she wanted, when the pain came.

"It was — like a thread spinning up and up, round the blade of the sharpest knife. Then it was cut into ribbons, and it was over. . . . She'd got me out of the car, onto the ground, when Jepson came. I don't know what made him come, or how he knew. But he was — overwhelmed, that's the word. Sick, with horror.

"Nella was stunned, for a moment. But only for a moment. Then she had her story for him. She said she'd never imagined the stuff she

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gave me would be fatal. She said she'd only wanted to knock me out for a few moments, so that she could get back some foolish letters she'd written to me. I'm sure Jepson didn't believe her. But he helped her. He tied a heavy stone on my ankles and another round my neck, and together they dragged me down to the lake and into the water, where it was deep.

"I stayed there, at the bottom of the lake, for a while, two or three days. But I knew, all the time, what had happened to me. I knew I could get out when I wanted."

"But how?" Marjorie cried.

"I don't know how to explain it," he said. "It doesn't seem strange to me. I can be anywhere I want, and it's no trouble, no effort. I can be here, or not here."

"You can disappear?" she said, unsteadily. "Vanish?"

"It doesn't seem like that, to me," he said. "To me, it's simply going away, somewhere else. It's hard for me to realize that I frighten anyone. I don't eat or drink, of course, because we don't need to. Nothing in us breaks down or wears out; nothing needs building up. But I'm just what I was, five years ago; the same blood, and bones, and muscles, the same mind. I can see, I can hear, I can speak. Why am I — terrible?"

"You're not!" she said, and it was true; all her cold horror and confusion had gone. "But why do you come back here? Is it to — make them remember what they did?"

"No," he said. "I don't care about Nella any more. And I'm only sorry for Jepson. He doesn't need any reminding. He's never got over it. He's — you can see it in his face, poor devil. . . . No, I've never let him see me here. No. It's Jean. You see, she's my child."

Marjorie began to cry, and that seemed to trouble him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I don't know where else to turn. It won't take a moment. If I give you the gun —"

"I couldn't! I couldn't! Please don't ask me! Can't you stay here — with Jean?"

"But don't you see?" he cried. "That's the worst of it. If anything should happen to her, if she should die, she'd go on, to the next world. And I couldn't. She'd be gone, and I couldn't find her. I beg of you — !"

The wind shook and rattled the front door; a freezing blast streamed in as it opened and Jepson stood there. Marjorie's lips parted, but before she could make a sound, there was a streak of yellow light, the crack of a shot, and George Stewart fell at her feet.

"I saw the whole thing from my window," said the woman who lived across the street. "And I called up the police at once. I saw Mr. Jepson go up on the veranda and look in at the window. I saw him open the door and when he was in the room, I saw him take out his gun and fire."

"I didn't mean to," said Jepson.

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That was what he had said to Marjorie, over and over, before the police came.

"Sure," said the police lieutenant. "You didn't know the gun was loaded. Only how did you get rid of the body so fast? Or was there a body? Did he —"

"No, he was dead, Lieutenant. There wasn't any doubt," said Jepson. "This time," he added.

"Yes," said the woman from across the street. "I can identify the dead man. His name is George Stewart, and I used to see him here —" She paused. "*A lot*," she said, with malicious significance.

"Did you see Mrs. Jepson?"

"Yes. She got out of the car, and she went into the house right after he did."

"Mrs. Jepson, will you tell us — ?"

"No," said Nella Jepson. "I have nothing to tell you. I'm not obliged to give evidence against my husband."

She could not have said anything more fatal to him, and, thought Marjorie, she knew that, and intended it to be so.

"I didn't mean to," said Jepson. "I didn't think he was . . . I didn't think there was anyone here."

"Do you wish to state that you did not see this man, when you fired a shot directly at him?"

Jepson wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. His heavy face was dazed and stricken.

"I didn't know I *could* see him. . . . I've thought about him, night and day. . . . I thought he was — gone."

"Come now, Mr. Jepson. Pull yourself together. Do you admit that you fired that shot?"

"Yes, I did. But I didn't think it would — do any harm."

"Why did you think that?" The police lieutenant waited. "Come now!" he said. "Why did you think it wouldn't 'do any harm' to fire a bullet in the man's back?"

Bear witness to the truth. . . . Marjorie was saying to herself. Never mind about your pride. Never mind what people will think of you. Never mind how hard it is. Mr. Jepson *can't* say it. But I can. I must.

"The man was dead before Mr. Jepson came in," she said.

"Why, he was not!" cried the woman from across the street. "I saw him, with my own eyes, standing there, talking to you!"

"He was a ghost," said Marjorie, with an effort that made her voice husky and deep.

Jepson turned to her, his blurred eyes brightening with gratitude.

"Yes!" he said. "Yes! You're — very kind. . . ."

"McGraw," said the lieutenant, "take Miss Smith home in your car."

"I'd rather stay —"

"You're not doing any good here, Miss Smith," said the lieutenant. "We'll want to ask you some questions, later on. *Will* we want to ask you questions! Perfect eyewitness testimony to a murder, plus a virtual

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confession — and no body to tie it to. The corpus delicti without a corpus . . . You're the one who should be able to straighten it out; but just now you're — overwrought. Drive her home, McGraw."

"Overwrought," Marjorie said to herself. Hysterical, does he mean? Or crazy? Raving? She could imagine the spiteful woman from across the street telling this story with delight. A *ghost*, that Smith girl said. *Imagine!* The story would spread through the little suburban town; perhaps it would reach the ears of people who liked her and respected her, but wouldn't want to leave her in charge of their children any more.

She could not save Jepson. His wife would not help him. He was doomed. He would go from here to a jail, if he was quiet, or a madhouse, if he insisted on the truth. She looked at him, and he smiled, and the blurred misery in his face had gone. It was as if his monstrous burden had at last been lifted, and he was at ease.

"Thank you!" he said, again.

Coming Next Month

Good news to all lovers of science fiction about people rather than things: Zenna Henderson has revealed more concerning The People, that intensely human group of stellar castaways on earth, whose warm chronicles began with the well-remembered *Ararat*. Her new novelet is called *Pottage*, and will appear in our next issue (on the stands around Aug. 2), along with a sharply contrasting feature novelet: a spiritedly entertaining tale of espionage among the stars by J. T. McIntosh, entitled *The Man Who Cried "Sheep."* There'll be short stories by Ward Moore, Idris Seabright and others, including a little-known Agatha Christie fantasy revived from the same volume in which her Broadway smash hit, WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION, originated; and there'll be the debut of a new F&SF feature: a column of reviews of science fiction and fantasy films by Charles Beaumont.

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You have undoubtedly emerged from the theater showing Hollywood's latest science fiction epic, muttering, "How in God's name does anybody think up such stories?" You need mutter no longer: now a young Salt Lake newspaperman, with a welcome gift for deadpan humor, reveals the secret of how science fiction films are conceived and written.

Chirp Me a Story

by BOB OTTUM

HE SWIVELED AROUND IN HIS CHAIR and stared idly at the script-girls joggling across the courtyard in the warm afternoon sun. Hunching still further, he propped both feet on the window sill and let his face fall into an expression designed to show he didn't care about losing his job. And through this Hollywood mask he looked out at the world.

The pigeons came coasting in silently as they always did at 3:15 for their snack of breadcrumbs on the ledge. Puffed up, they strutted around and picked out the better pieces first, ignoring his crossed feet.

"Hi, men." He looked at them lazily. "Eat, drink and be gay, for tomorrow you may have to find another window."

"Might be an improvement at that." A lavender-breasted bird pushed away a crumb with his toe. "This bread isn't exactly the freshest." He hopped up on a shoe. "But never mind that. Can you tell me where I can find Joe Martin, the screen writer?"

"I'm Joe Martin." He shook the bird from his foot. "And what did you expect, French pastry, maybe?"

"I'm a talking pigeon, Joe."

"So. I can hear you talking. You'd better be able to sing and dance a little, too, or you'll never get by in this town." He looked, unmoved, at the bird. The pigeon looked back, head cocked.

"Listen, Joe, I flew a long way to get here. I got to talk to you. I . . ."

"Look, Lavender, or whatever the hell your name is. Fly on away. Shoo. I can't work any talking pigeons into my act today. I'm busy waiting for the ax to fall. And I hope the next guy who inherits this office puts poison in the breadcrumbs."

". . . all the way from Altoona, Pa., I flew," the bird continued, ignoring the comment. "Uh . . .

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may I come in, just for a few minutes?"

"No. Get lost. I know what you're going to say already," Joe growled. "You've got a great idea for a movie story. An epic. A real sleeper. And you want me to do the screenplay. And the answer is no."

"Yes," said the bird. "Really, Joe, you gas me. First, you're not surprised to see a talking pigeon; second, you . . . uh, you got anything to drink in there?"

"So you're a lush, too." He sighed, resignedly. "Well, come on in. Here, perch up on the desk and . . ."

"No wisecracks about office-broken birds, Buster. I been indoors before."

"So all right. Like rye?" He lifted the bottle from a drawer and put it on the desk. "How about all your little feathered pals out there? Shall I set out a saucer?"

"They're just plain, ordinary pigeons. Let 'em eat crumbs."

Joe Martin poured two shot glasses full and waited politely until the bird had dipped its head down and tossed off a small one.

"This is for the birds," he said like a toast and drank his down, neat.

"Hmmmmmmmmmph," the pigeon said, clearing his throat. "I always liked rye. Always. Hmmmph. Now: Like you said, I got a story idea. But what an idea! Listen, this just happens to be the biggest thing since the bird bath. This is . . ."

"Pardon me. Mind if I have another?"

"No. Go right ahead." The pigeon dipped his bill down into the glass again, then twisted his head far back to let the rye roll down.

Joe scowled at the bird and drank a big one out of the bottle. He licked his lips and leaned back in the chair again.

The pigeon sat down on the ash tray and crossed his legs. "Now, the way I see it, Joe, is this: You're in a helluva slump, right? You haven't had a good story credit since the year of the blue snow. Your job is hanging by a thin thread. So this yarn of mine . . ."

"Oh, all right." The writer waved a hand, airily. "Let's hear the story."

"That's better. And you might pour me another small dollop while you're listening."

Joe poured one and drank one.

"Thanks. Now this is a story about a space trip, see? All in vogue now with the studios. Everybody's making them. Well, we've got this space trip to the moon, with this guy in a big glass helmet and all that routine.

"So he lands on the planet and right away he sees this beautiful doll. She's standing there waiting for him, her hair flowing in the wind, in this knocked-out, abbreviated costume. This kid's got everything: Long honey-blonde hair, big chest and tanned legs and a little red design on her stomach instead of

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a bellybutton. And right away he's mad for her. You get this terrific camera shot as the handsome young space-explorer and the flaxen-haired moon maid stand transfixed, staring at each other across the eons that separate them."

"Better have another one. Here." Joe tipped up the bottle.

"See? I knew it! I can tell already you're interested. Knew you'd love this. It's just colossal, that's all." The pigeon arched its neck and let another drink roll away. "Now, to go on:

"So the people here are friendly. They love our boy. Big local hero and all that stuff. And the girl is all-the-time hanging around. They stroll up to the moon-pits and he necks her a little. Then you get this shot of him looking at his rocket ship parked out there in that eerie light. You can see by his face he's torn through with indecision. What to do? He's supposed to be gathering scientific data for the Earth. Yet, he's in love. This is it. Duty calls; yet, here is paradise. Which will win?"

Joe leaned over closer.

"So the guy takes a big hammer and he goes out and pounds the rocket ship into little teensy pieces and he kicks them all around. Then he turns and looks off into the sky and here we come in close for this terrific angle-shot of the planet Earth hanging up there, fat and green. The young scientist has cut off all connection with the past.

"Then he turns, and here is the babe, with the soft, hot breeze rippling her gauzy costume, moulding it to her body. Big tears are welling up in those lovely amber eyes. They clinch, there in the wreckage, and the boy says, mumbling into her hair, 'Let's get married, kid. . . .' "

"Fine. Keep dancing." Joe yanked savagely on his tie and unbuttoned his shirt collar.

"So there's this big wedding scene. The camera dollies all around for shots of the happy crowd. Throwing flowers and all that routine. He's even changed into one of the little costumes. Then, they're standing in the honeymoon suite . . ."

The pigeon paused, heaving a deep breath.

"They're in the bedroom and he's kissing her like crazy. A tender close-up shot of him kissing her eyelids and that bit. 'By the way, baby,' he asks idly, 'what's that cute little gimmick on your little tummy instead of a bellybutton like me?' The girl smiles and runs her hands through his tousled hair. 'Why, didn't you know, doll,' she says, 'that's an hour-glass design. Here on this planet we women eat our mates after the wedding night. . . .' Then the camera comes in fast to catch the spreading horror on his face, and then we slowly pan across the room and over to the window where you get this framed shot out across the moon-pits to where the wreckage of his rocket

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ship stands outlined against the night sky.'"

"It's great." Joe blinked a few times, unashamedly. "It's just plain old great." He picked up the phone and dialed a number. "But . . . but what if the boss finds out about this?"

"Not a chance. I'm *no* . . . get this: I'm no stool pigeon." The bird flopped over on the desk blotter and rolled around, cooing. "Not a stool pigeon. What a line!" He lay on his back and pointed both feet up. "Wow! Honest, I ought to be playing that two-a-day at the Palace." He rolled over. "But, wait. Before you make that call."

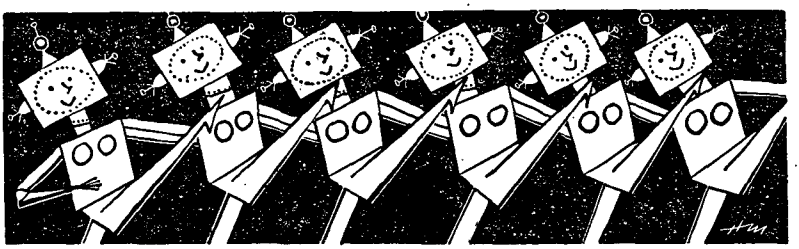
The pigeon hopped unsteadily back down the length of Joe's leg and back onto the window sill. Leaning out, he whistled sharply down toward the courtyard, then turned back.

"Now what?" said Joe.

"What a team, huh?" The bird wheeled around in a little off-to-Buffalo, shedding some feathers. "We're really going to go places from here, Josey, ol' boy. But first you got to meet a pal of mine. . . ."

"All right, all right," Joe reached for the bottle again and tipped it up. "Let's have it."

"It's a bluebird," the pigeon said proudly, puffed up. "He does Westerns."



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In the present rivalry between free enterprise and socialism (or at least between systems employing those labels for their practices), we are apt to forget that there are countless other possible ways of distributing wealth among a population. Mr. Anderson has chosen to examine a society whose economics is based upon gambling (with all that that entails in the way of paramathematical skills). When this happy culture meets a militaristic civilization bound for galactic conquest, the result is some of the most vivid space warfare in some time, and a moral of significance to gamblers and soldiers alike.

Inside Straight

by POUL ANDERSON

In the main, sociodynamic theory predicted quite accurately the effects of the secondary drive. It foresaw that once cheap interstellar transportation was available, there would be considerable emigration from the Solar System — men looking for a fresh start, malcontents of all kinds, "peculiar people" desiring to maintain their form of life without interference. It also predicted that these colonies would in turn spawn colonies, again of unsatisfied minority groups, until this part of the Galaxy was sprinkled with human-settled planets; and that in their relative isolation, these politically independent worlds would develop some very odd societies.

However, the economic bias of the Renascence period, and the fact that war was a discarded institution in the Solar System, led these same predictors into errors of detail. It was felt that, since planets useful to man are normally separated by scores of light-years, and since any planet colonized on a high technological level would be quite self-sufficient, there would be little intercourse and no strife between these settlements. In their own reasonableness, the Renascence intellectuals overlooked the fact that man as a whole is not a rational animal, and that exploration and war do not always have economic causes.

— Simon Vardis, *A Short History of Pre-Commonwealth Politics*, Reel I, Frame 617

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THEY DID NOT BUILD HIGH ON NEW Hermes. There was plenty of room, and the few cities sprawled across many square kilometers in a complex of low, softly tinted domes and cylindroids. Parks spread green wherever you looked, each breeze woke a thousand bell-trees into a rush of chiming, flowers and the bright-winged summerflits ran wildly colored beneath a serene blue sky. The planetary capital, Arkinshaw, had the same leisurely old-fashioned look as the other towns Ganch had seen; only down by the docks was there a fevered energy and a brawling life.

The restaurant Wayland had taken him to was incredibly archaic; it even had live service. When they had finished a subtly prepared lunch, the waiter strolled to their table. "Was there anything else, sir?" he asked.

"I thank you, no," said Wayland. He was a small, lithe man with close-cropped gray-shot hair and a brown nutcracker face in which lay startlingly bright blue eyes. On him, the local dress — a knee-length plaid tunic, green buskins, and yellow mantle — looked good . . . which was more than you could say for most of them, reflected Ganch.

The waiter produced a tray. There was no bill on it, as Ganch had expected, but a pair of dice. *Oh, no!* he thought. *By the Principle, no! Not this again!*

Wayland rattled the cubes in his hand, muttering an incantation. They flipped on the table, eight spots looked up. "Fortune seems to favor you, sir," said the waiter.

"May she smile on a more worthy son," replied Wayland. Ganch noted with disgust that the planet's urbanity-imperative extended even to servants. The waiter shook the dice and threw.

"Snake eyes," he smiled. "Congratulations, sir. I trust you enjoyed the meal."

"Yes, indeed," said Wayland, rising. "My compliments to the chef, and you and he are invited to my next poker game. I'll have an announcement about it on the telescreens."

He and the waiter exchanged bows and compliments. Then Wayland left, ushering Ganch through the door and out onto the slidewalk. They found seats and let it carry them toward the waterfront, which Ganch had expressed a desire to see.

"Ah—" Ganch cleared his throat. "How was that done?"

"Eh?" Wayland blinked. "Don't you even have dice on Dromm?"

"Oh, yes. But I mean the principle of payment for the meal."

"I shook him. Double or nothing. I won."

Ganch shook his head. He was a tall, muscular man in a skin-tight black uniform. That and the scarlet eyes in his long bony face (not albinism, but healthy mutation) marked him as belonging to the Great Cadre of Dromm.

"But then the restaurant loses money," he said.

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"This time, yes," nodded Wayland. "It evens out in the course of a day — just as all our commerce evens out, so that in the long run everybody earns his rightful wage or profit."

"But suppose one — ah — cheats?"

Surprisingly, Wayland reddened, and looked around. When he spoke again, it was in a low voice: "Don't ever use that word, sir, I beg of you. I realize the mores are different on your planet, but here there is one unforgiveable, utterly obscene sin, and it's the one you just mentioned." He sat back, breathing heavily for a while, then seemed to cool off and proffered cigars. Ganch declined — tobacco did not grow on Dromm — but Wayland puffed his own into lighting with obvious enjoyment.

"As a matter of fact," he said presently, "our whole social conditioning is such as to preclude the possibility of . . . unfairness. You realize how thoroughly an imperative can be inculcated with modern psychopediatrics. It is a matter of course that all equipment, from dice and coins to the most elaborate Stellarium set, is periodically checked by a Games Engineer."

"I see," said Ganch doubtfully.

He looked around as the slidewalk carried him on. It was a pleasant, sunny day, like most on New Hermes. Only to be expected on a world with two small continents, all the rest of the land split into a multitude of islands. The people he saw had a relaxed appearance — the men in their tunics and mantles, the women in their loose filmy gowns, the children in little or nothing. A race of sybarites; they had had it too easy here, and degenerated.

Sharply he remembered Dromm, its gaunt glacial peaks and wind-scoured deserts, storm and darkness galloping down from the poles, the huge iron cubicles of cities and the obedient gray-clad masses that filled them. That world had brought forth the Great Cadre, and tempered them in struggle and heartbreak, and given them power first over a people and then over a planet and then over two systems.

Eventually . . . who knew? The Galaxy?

"I am interested in your history," he said, recalling himself. "Just how was New Hermes settled?"

"The usual process," shrugged Wayland. "Our folk came from Caledonia, which had been settled from Old Hermes, whose people were from Earth. A puritanical gang got into control and started making all kinds of senseless restrictions on natural impulses. Finally a small group, our ancestors, could take no more, and went off looking for a planet of their own. That was about three hundred years ago. They went far, into this spiral arm which was then completely unexplored, in the hope of being left alone; and that hope has been realized. To this day, except for a couple of minor wars, we've had only casual visitors like yourself."

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Casual! A grim amusement twisted Ganch's mouth upward.

To cover it, he asked: "But surely you've had your difficulties? It cannot have been simply a matter of landing here and founding your cities."

"Oh, no, of course not. The usual pioneer troubles — unknown diseases, wild animals, storms, a strange ecology. There were some hard times before the machines were constructed. Now, of course, we have it pretty good. There are fifty million of us, and space for many more; but we're in no hurry to expand the population. We like elbow room."

Ganch frowned until he had deduced the meaning of that last phrase. They spoke Anglic here, as on Dromm and most colonies, but naturally an individual dialect had evolved.

Excitement gripped him. Fifty million! There were two hundred million people on Dromm, and conquered Thanit added half again as many.

Of course, said his military training, sheer numbers meant little. Automatized equipment made all but the most highly skilled officers and technicians irrelevant. War between systems involved sending a space fleet, which met and beat the enemy fleet in a series of engagements; bases on planets had to be manned, and sometimes taken by ground forces, but the fighting was normally remote from the worlds concerned. Once the enemy navy was broken, its home had to capitulate or be sterilized by bombardment from the skies.

Still . . . New Hermes should be an even easier prey than Thanit had been.

"Haven't you taken any precautions against . . . hostiles?" he asked, mostly because the question fitted his assumed character.

"Oh, yes, to be sure," said Wayland. "We maintain a navy and marine corps; matter of fact, I'm in the Naval Intelligence Reserve myself, captain's rank. We had to fight a couple of small wars in the previous century, once with the Corridans — nonhumans out for loot — and once with Oberkassel, whose people were on a religious-fanatic kick. We won them both without much trouble." He added modestly: "But of course, sir, neither planet was very intelligently guided."

Ganch suppressed a desire to ask for figures on naval strength. This guileless dice-thrower might well spout them on request, but —

The slidewalk had reached the waterfront by now, and they got off. Here the sea glistened blue, streaked with white foam, and the harbor was crowded with shipping. There were not only flying boats, but big watercraft moored to the ferroconcrete piers. Machines were loading and unloading in a whirl of bright steel arms, warehouses gaped for the planet's wealth, the air was rich with oil and spices. A babbling confusion of humanity surfed around

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Ganch and broke on his eardrums in a roar.

Wayland pointed unobtrusively here and there, his voice almost lost in the din: "See, we have quite a cultural variety of our own. That tall blond man in the fur coat is from Norrin, he must have brought in a load of pelts. The little dark fellow in the sarong is a spice trader from the Radiant Islands. The Mongoloid wearing a robe is clear from the Ivory Gate, probably with handicrafts to exchange for our timber. And —"

They were interrupted by a young woman, a very good-looking young woman with long black hair and a tilt-nosed freckled face. She wore a light blue uniform jacket with a lieutenant's twin comets on the shoulders, as well as a short loose-woven skirt revealing slim brown legs. "Will! Where have you been?"

"Showing the distinguished guest of our government around," said Wayland formally. "The Prime Selector himself appointed me to that pleasant task. Ganch, may I have the honor of presenting my niece, Lieutenant Christabel Hesty of the New Hermesian Navy? Lieutenant Hesty, this gentleman hight Ganch, from Dromm. It's a planet lying about fifty light-years from us, a very fine place I'm sure. They are making a much-overdue ethnographic survey of this Galactic region, and Ganch is taking notes on us."

"Honored, sir." She bowed and shook hands with herself in the manner of Arkinshaw. "We've heard of Dromm. There have been visitors thence in the past several years. I trust you are enjoying your stay?"

Ganch saluted stiffly, as was prescribed for the Great Cadre. "Thank you, very much." He was a little shocked at such blatant sexual egalitarianism, but reflected that it might be turned to advantage.

"Will, you're just the man I want to see." Lieutenant Hesty's voice bubbled over. "I came down to wager on a cargo from Thorncroft and you —"

"Ah, yes. I'll be glad to help you, though of course the requirements of my guild are —"

"You'll get your commission." She made a face at him and turned laughing to Ganch. "Perhaps you didn't know, sir, my uncle is a Tipster?"

"No, I didn't," said the Dromman. "What profession is that?"

"Probability analyst. It takes years and years of training. When you want to make an important wager, you call in a Tipster." She tugged at Wayland's sleeve. "Come on, the trading will start any minute."

"Do you mind, sir?" asked Wayland.

"Not at all," said Ganch. "I would be very interested. Your economic system is unique." *And*, he added, *the most inefficient I have yet heard of.*

They entered a building which

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proved to be a single great room. In the center was a long table, around which crowded a colorful throng of men and women. There was an outsize electronic device of some kind at the end, with a tall rangy man in kilt and beryllium-copper breastplate at the controls. Wayland stood aside, his face taking on an odd withdrawn look.

"How does this work?" asked Ganch — *sotto voce*, for the crowd did not look as if it wanted its concentration disturbed.

"The croupier there is the trader from Thorncroft," whispered Christabel Hesty. This close, with her head just beneath his chin, Ganch could smell the faint sun-warmed perfume of her hair. It stirred a wistfulness in him, buried ancestral memories of summer meadows on Earth. He choked off the emotion and listened to her words.

"He's brought in a load of refined thorium, immensely valuable. He puts that up as his share, and those who wish to trade get into the game with shares of what they have — they cover him, just as in craps, though they're playing Orthotron now. The game is a complex one, I see a lot of Tipsters around . . . yes, and the man in the green robe is a Games Engineer, umpire and technician. I'm afraid you wouldn't understand the rules at once, but perhaps you would like to make side bets?"

"No, thank you," said Ganch. "I am content to observe."

He soon found out that Lieutenant Hesty had not exaggerated the complications. Orthotron seemed to be a remote descendant of roulette such as they had played on Thanit before the war, but the random-pulse tubes shifted the probabilities continuously, and the rules themselves changed as the game went on. When the scoreboard on the machine flashed, chips to the tune of millions of credits clattered from hand to hand. Ganch found it hard to believe that anyone could even learn the system, let alone become so expert in it as to make a profession of giving advice. A Tipster would have to allow for the presence of other Tipsters, and —

His respect for Wayland went up. The little man must have put a lightning-fast mind through years of the most rigorous training; and there must be a highly developed paramathematical theory behind it all. If that intelligence and energy had gone into something useful, military technics for instance —

But it hadn't, and New Hermes lay green and sunny, wide open for the first determined foe.

Ganch grew aware of tension. It was not overtly expressed, but faces tightened, changed color, pupils narrowed and pulses beat in temples until he could almost feel the emotion, crackling like lightning in the room. Now and then Wayland spoke quietly to his niece, and she laid her bets accordingly.

It was with an effort that she

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pulled herself away, with two hours lost and a few hundred credits gained. Only courtesy to the guest made her do it. Her hair was damply plastered to her forehead, and she went out with a stiff-legged gait which only slowly loosened.

Wayland accepted his commission and laughed a little shakily. "I earn my living, sir!" he said. "It's brutal on the nerves."

"How long will they play?" asked Ganch.

"Till the trader is cleaned out or has won so much that no one can match him. In this case, I'd estimate about thirty hours."

"Continuous? How can the nervous system endure it — not to mention the feet?"

"It's hard," admitted Christabel Hesty, seeming to wake from a troubled dream. Her eyes burned. "But exciting! There's nothing in the Galaxy quite like that suspense. You lose yourself in it."

"And, of course," said Wayland mildly, "man adapts to any cultural pattern. We'd find it difficult to live as you do on Dromm."

No doubt, thought Ganch sardonically. *But you are going to learn how!*

On an isolated planet like this, an outworlder was always a figure of romance. In spite of manners which must seem crude here, Ganch had only to suggest an evening out for Christabel Hesty to leap at the offer.

He simply changed to another uniform, but she appeared in a topless gown of deep-blue silkite, her dark hair sprinkled with tiny points of light, and made his heart stumble. He reminded himself that women were breeders, nothing else. But Principle! How dull they were on Dromm!

His object was to gain information, but he decided he might as well enjoy his work.

They took an elevated way to the Stellar House, Arkinshaw's only skyscraper, and had cocktails in a clear-domed roof garden with sunset rioting around them. A gentle music, some ancient waltz from Earth herself, lilted in the air, and the gaily clad diners talked in low voices and clinked glasses and laughed softly.

Lieutenant Hesty raised her glass to his. "Your luck, sir," she pledged him. Then, smiling: "Shall we lower guard?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"My apologies. I forgot you are a stranger, sir. The proposal was to relax formality for this evening."

"By all means," said Ganch. He tried to smile in turn. "Though I fear my class is always rather stiff."

Her long, soot-black eyelashes fluttered. "Then I hight Chris tonight," she said. "And your first name . . .?"

"My class does not use them. I am simply Ganch, with various identifying symbols attached."

"We meet some strange out-

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worlders," she said frankly, "but in truth, you Drommans seem the most exotic of all."

"And New Hermes gives us that impression," he chuckled.

"We know so little about you — there have been only a few explorers and traders, and now you. Is your mission official?"

"Everything on Dromm is official," said Ganch, veraciously enough. "I am only an ethnographer making a detailed study of your folkways." And that was a lie.

"Excuse my saying so, I shouldn't criticize another civilization, but isn't it terribly dull having all one's life regulated by the State?"

"It is . . ." Ganch hunted for words. "Secure," he finished earnestly. "Ordered. One knows where one stands."

"A pity you had that war with Thanit. They seemed such nice people, those who visited here."

"We had no choice," answered Ganch with the smoothness of rote. "An irresponsible, aggressive government attacked us." She did not ask for details, and he supposed it was the usual thing: interest in other people's fate obeys an inverse-square law, and 50 light-years is a gulf of distance no man can really imagine.

In point of fact, he told himself with the bitter honesty of his race, Thanit had sought peace up to the last moment; Dromm's ultimatum had demanded impossible concessions, and Thanit had had no choice but to fight a hopeless battle. Her conquest had been well-planned, the armored legions of Dromm had romped over her and now she was being digested by the State.

Chris frowned, a shadow on the wide clear brow. "I find it hard to see why they would make war — why anyone would," she murmured. "Isn't there enough on any planet to content its people? And if by chance they should be unhappy, there are always new worlds."

"Well," shrugged Ganch, "you should know why. You're in the Navy yourself, aren't you, and New Hermes has fought a couple of times."

"Only in self-defense," she said. "Naturally, we now mount guard on our defeated enemies, even 70 years later, just to be sure they don't try again. As for me, I have a very peaceful desk job in the statistics branch, correlating data."

Ganch felt a thrumming within himself. He could hardly have asked for better luck. Precise information on the armament of New Hermes was just what Dromm lacked. If he could bring it back to old wan Halsker — it would mean a directorship, at least!

And afterward, when a new conquest was to be administered and made over. . . . His ruby eyes studied Chris from beneath drooping lids. A territorial governor had certain perquisites of office.

"I suppose there are many poor twisted people in the universe," went on the girl. "Like those Ober-

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kassel priests, with their weird doctrine they wanted to force on all mankind. It's hard to believe intolerance exists, but alien planets have done strange things to human minds."

There was a veiling in her own violent gaze as she looked at him. She must want to know his own soul, what it was that drove the Great Cadre and why anyone should enjoy having power over other men. He could have told her a great deal — the cruel wintry planet, the generations-long war against the unhuman Ixlatt who made sport of torturing prisoners, then war between factions that split men, war against the red-eyed mutants, whipped-up xenophobia, pogroms, concentration camps . . . Ganch's grandfather had died in one.

But the mutation was more than an accidental mark, it was in the nervous system, a steel answer to a pitiless environment. A man of the Great Cadre simply did not know fear on the conscious level. Danger lashed him to alertness, but there was no fright to cloud his thoughts. And, by genetics or merely as the result of persecution, he had a will to power which only death could stop. The Great Cadre had subdued a hundred times their numbers, and made them into brain-channeled tools of the State, simply by being braver and more able in war. And Dromm was not enough, not when each darkness brought a mockery of unconquered stars out overhead.

A philosopher from distant Archbishop, where they went in for imaginative speculation, had visited Dromm a decade ago. His remark still lay in Ganch's mind, and stung: "Unjust treatment is apt to produce paranoia in the victim. Your race has outlived its oppressors, but not the reflexes they built into your society. You'll never rest till all the universe is enslaved, for your canalized nervous systems make you incapable of regarding anyone else as anything but a dangerous enemy."

The philosopher had not gone home alive, but his words remained; Ganch had tried to forget them, and could not.

Enough! His mind had completed its track in the blink of an eye, and now he remembered that the girl expected an answer. He sipped his cocktail and spoke thoughtfully:

"Yes, these special groups, isolated on their own special planets, have developed in many peculiar ways. New Hermes, for instance, if you will pardon my saying so."

Chris raised level brows. "Of course, this is my home and I'm used to it, Ganch," she replied, "but I fail to see anything which would surprise an outsider very much. We live quietly, for the most part, with a loose parliamentary government to run planetary affairs. The necessities of life are produced free for all by the automatic factories; to avoid the annoyance of regulations, we leave everything else to private enterprise, subject only to the rea-

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sonable restrictions of the Conservation Authority and a fair-practices act. We don't need more government than that, because the educational system instills respect for the rights and dignity of others and we have no ambitious public-works projects.

"You might say our whole culture is founded merely on a principle of live and let live."

She stroked her chin, man-fashion. "Of course, we have police and courts. And we discourage a concentration of power, political or economic, but that's only to preserve individual liberty. Our economic system helps; it's hard to build up a gigantic business when one game may wipe it out."

"Now there," said Ganch, "you strike the oddity. This passion for gambling. How does it arise?"

"Oh . . . I wouldn't call it a passion. It's merely one way of pricing goods and services, just as haggling is on Kwan-Yin, and socialism on Arjay, and supply-demand on Alexander."

"But how did it originate?"

Chris lifted smooth bare shoulders and smiled. "Ask the historians, not me. I suppose our ancestors, reacting from the Caledonian puritanism, were apt to glorify all vices and practice them to excess. Gambling was the only one which didn't taper off as a more balanced society evolved. It came to be a custom. Gradually it superseded the traditional methods of exchange.

"It doesn't make any difference, you see; being honest gambling, it comes out even. Win one, lose one . . . that's almost the motto of our folk. To be sure, in games of skill like poker, a good player will come out ahead in the long run; but any society gives an advantage to certain talents. On Alexander, most of the money and prestige flow to the successful entrepreneur. On Einstein, the scientists are the rich and honored leaders. On Hellas, it's male prowess and female beauty. On Arjay, it's the political spellbinder. On Dromm, I suppose, the soldier is on top. With us, it's the shrewd gambler.

"The important thing," she finished gravely, "is not who gets the most, but whether everyone gets enough."

"But that is what makes me wonder," said Ganch. "This trader we saw today, for instance. Suppose he loses everything?"

"It would be a blow, of course. But he wouldn't starve, because the necessities are free anyway; and he'll have enough sense — he'll have learned in the primaries — to keep a small emergency reserve to start over with. We have very few paupers."

"Your financial structure must be most complicated."

"It is," she said wryly. "We've had to develop a tremendous theoretical science and a great number of highly trained men to handle it. That game today was childish com-

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pared with what goes on in, say, the securities exchange. I don't pretend to understand what happens there. I'm content to turn a wheel for my monthly pay, and if I win to go out and see if I can't make a little more."

"And you *enjoy* this — insecurity?"

"Why, yes. As I imagine you enjoy war, and an engineer enjoys building a spaceship, and —" Chris looked at the table. "It's always hard and risky settling a new planet, even one as Earth-like as ours. Our ancestors got a taste for excitement. When there was no more to be had in subduing nature, they transferred the desire to — Ah, here come the hors d'oeuvres."

Ganch ate a stately succession of courses with pleasure. He was not good at small talk, but Chris made such eager conversation that it was simple to lead her: the details of her life and work, little insignificant items but they clicked together. By the coffee and liqueur, Ganch knew where the military microfiles of New Hermes were kept and was fairly sure he knew how to get at them.

Afterward they danced. Ganch had never done it before, but his natural coordination soon fitted him into the rhythm. There was a curious bittersweet savor to holding the girl in his arms . . . dearest enemy. He wondered if he should try to make love to her. An infatuated female officer would be useful —

No. In such matters, she was the sophisticate and he the bumbling yokel. Coldly, though not without regret, he dismissed the idea.

They sat at a poker table for a while, where the management put up chips to the value of their bill. Ganch was completely outclassed; he learned the game readily enough, but his excellent analytical mind simply could not match the Hermesians. It was almost as if they knew what cards he held. He lost heavily, but Chris made up for it and when they quit they only had to pay half what they owed.

They hired an aircar, and for a while its gravity drive lifted them noiselessly into a night-blue sky, under a flooding moon and a myriad stars and the great milky sprawl of the Galaxy. Beneath them, a broken bridge of moonlight shuddered across the darkened sea, and they heard the far, faint crying of birds.

When he let Chris off at her apartment, Ganch wanted to stay. It was a wrenching to say goodnight and turn back to his own hotel. He stamped out the wish with a bleak will and bent his mind elsewhere. There was work to do.

Dromm was nothing if not thorough. Her agents had been on New Hermes for ten years now, mostly posing as natives of unsuspicious planets like Guise and Anubis. Enough had been learned to earmark this world for conquest after Thanit, and to lay out the basic military campaign.

The Hermesians were not really

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naïve. They had their own spies and counterspies. Customs inspection was careful. But each Dromman visitor had brought a few plausible objects with him — a personal teleset, a depilator, a sample of small nuclear-powered tools for sale — nothing to cause remark; and those objects had stayed behind, in care of a supposed immigrant from Kwan-Yin who lived in Arkinshaw. This man had refashioned them into as efficient a set of machinery for breaking and entering as existed anywhere in the known Galaxy.

Ganch was quite sure Wayland had a tail on him. It was an elementary precaution. But a Field Intelligence officer of Dromm had ways to shake a tail off without its appearing more than accidental. Ganch went out the following afternoon, having notified Wayland that he did not need a guide: he only wanted to stroll around and look at things for himself. After wandering a bit, he went into a pleasure house. It was a holiday, Discovery Day, and Arkinshaw swarmed with a merry crowd; in the jam-packed house, Ganch slipped quietly into a washroom cubicle.

His shadows would most likely watch all exits; and they wouldn't be surprised if he stayed inside for many hours. The hetaerae of New Hermes were famous.

Alone, Ganch slipped out of his uniform and stuffed it down the rubbish disintegrator. Beneath it he wore the loose blue coat and trousers of a Kwan-Yin colonist. A life-mask over his head, a complete alteration of posture and gait . . . it was another man who stepped into the hall and sauntered out the main door as if his amusements were completed. He went quite openly to Fraybiner's house; what was more natural than that some home-planet relative of Tao Chung should pay a call?

When they were alone, Fraybiner let out a long breath. "By the Principle, it's good to be with a man again!" he said. "If you knew how sick I am of these chattering decadents —"

"Enough!" snapped Ganch. "I am here on business. Operation Lift."

Fraybiner's surgically slanted and darkened eyes widened. "So it's finally coming off?" he murmured. "I was beginning to wonder."

"If I get away with it," said Ganch grimly. "Even if I don't, it doesn't matter. Exact knowledge of the enemy's strength will be valuable, but we have enough information already to launch the war."

Fraybiner began operating concealed studs. A false wall slid aside to reveal a large safe, on which he got to work. "How will you take it home?" he asked. "When they find their files looted, they won't let anyone leave the planet without a thorough search."

Ganch didn't reply; Fraybiner had no business knowing. Actually,

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the files were going to be destroyed, once read, and their contents go home in Ganch's eidetic memory. But that versatile ethnographer did not plan to leave for some weeks yet: no use causing unnecessary suspicion. When he finally did — a surprise attack on all the Hermesian bases would immobilize them at one swoop.

He smiled to himself. Even knowing they were to be attacked, their whole planet fully alerted, the Hermesians were finished. It was well-established that their fleet had less than half the strength of Dromm's, and not a single Supernova-class dreadnaught. Ganch's information would be extremely helpful, but it was by no means vital.

Except, of course, to Ganch Z-17837-JX-39. But death was a threat he treated with the contempt it deserved.

Fraybiner had gotten the safe open, and a dull metal gleam of instruments and weapons lay before their gaze. Ganch inspected each item carefully while the other jittered with impatience. Finally he donned the flying combat armor and hung the implements at its belt. By that time, the sun was down and the stars out.

Chris had said the Naval HQ building was deserted at night except for its guards. Previous spies had learned where these were posted. "Very well," said Ganch. "I'm on my way. I won't see you again, and advise you to move elsewhere soon. If the natives turn out to be stubborn, we'll have to destroy this city."

Fraybiner nodded, and activated the ceiling door. Ganch went up on his gravity beams and out into the sky. The city was a jeweled spiderweb beneath him, and fireworks burst with great soft explosions of color. His outfit was a non-reflecting dull black, and there was only a whisper of air to betray his flight.

The HQ building, broad and low, rested on a greensward several kilometers from Arkinshaw. Ganch approached its slumbering dark mass carefully, taking his time. A bare meter's advance, an instrument reading . . . yes, they had a radio-alarm field set up. He neutralized it with his heterodyning unit, flew another cautious meter, stopped to readjust the neutralization. The moon was down, but he wished the stars weren't so bright.

It was past midnight when he lay in the shrubbery surrounding a rear entrance. A pair of sentries, armed and helmeted, tramped almost by his nose, crossing paths in front of the door. He waited, learning the pattern of their march.

When his tactics were fully planned, he rose as one marine came by and let the fellow have a sonic stun-beam. Too low-powered to trip an alarm, it was close-range and to the base of the neck. Ganch caught the body as it fell, let it down, and picked up the same measured tread.

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He felt no conscious tension as he neared the other man, though a sharp glance through darkness would end the ruse, but his muscles gathered themselves. He was almost abreast of the Hermesian when he saw the figure recoil in alarm. His stunner went off again. It was a bad shot; the sentry lurched but retained a wavering consciousness. Ganch sprang on him, one tigerish bound, a squeezed trigger, and he lowered the marine as gently as a woman might her lover.

For a moment he stood looking down on the slack face. A youngster, hardly out of his teens, there was something strangely innocent about him as he slept. About this whole world. They were too kind here, they didn't belong in a universe of wolves.

He had no doubt they would fight bravely and skillfully. Dromm would have to pay for her conquest. But the age of heroes was past. War was not an art, it was a science, and a set of giant computers coldly chewing an involved symbolism told ships and men what to do. Given equal courage and equally intelligent leadership, it was merely a heartless arithmetic that the numerically superior fleet would win.

No time to lose! He spun on his heel and crouched over the door. His instruments traced out its circuits, a diamond drill bit into plastic, a wire shorted a current . . . the door opened for him and he went into a hollow darkness of corridors.

Lightly, even in the clumsy armor, he made his way toward the main file room. Once he stopped, his instruments sensed a black-light barrier and it took him a quarter of an hour to neutralize it. But then he was in among the cabinets.

They were not locked, and his thin flashbeam picked out the categories held in each drawer. Swiftly, then, he took the spools relating to ships, bases, armament, disposition . . . he ignored the codes, which would be changed anyway when the burglary was discovered. The entire set went into one small pouch such as the men of Kwan-Yin carried, and he had a microreader at the hotel.

The lights went on.

Before his eyes had adjusted to that sudden blaze, before he was consciously aware of action, Ganch's drilled reflexes had gone to work. His faceplate clashed down, gauntlets snapped shut around his hands, and a Mark IV blaster was at his shoulder even as he whirled to meet the intruders.

There were a score of them, and their gay holiday attire was somehow nightmarish behind the weapons they carried. Wayland was in the lead, harshness on his face, and Christabel at his back. The rest Ganch did not recognize, they must be naval officers but — He crouched, covering them, a robot figure cased in a centimeter of imperviousness.

"So." Wayland spoke it quietly, a flat tone across the enormous

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silence. "I wondered — Ganch, I suppose."

The Dromman did not answer. There was a thin fine singing as his helmet absorbed the stun beam Chris was aiming at it.

"When my men reported you had been ten hours in the joyhouse, I thought it best to check up: first your quarters and then —" Wayland paused. "I didn't think you'd penetrate this far. But it could only be you, Ganch, so you may as well surrender."

The spy shook his head, futile gesture inside that metal box he wore. "No. It is you who are trapped," he answered steadily. "I can blast you all before your beams work through my armor. . . . Don't move!"

"You wouldn't escape," said Wayland. "The fight would trip alarms bringing the whole Fort Canfield garrison down on you." Sweat beaded his forehead. Perhaps he thought of his niece and the gun which could make her a blackened husk; but his own small-bore flamer held firm.

"This means war," said Chris. "We've wondered about Dromm for a long time. Now we know." Tears glimmered in her eyes. "And it's so senseless!"

Ganch laughed without much humor. "Impasse," he said. "I can kill all of you, but that would bring my own death. Be sure, though, that the failure of my mission will make little difference."

Wayland stood brooding for a while. "You're congenitally unafraid to die," he said at last. "The rest of us prefer to live, but will die if we must. So any decision must be made with a view to planetary advantage."

Ganch's heart sprang within his ribs. He had lost, unless —

He still had an even chance.

"You're a race of gamblers," he said. "Will you gamble now?"

"Not with our planet," said Chris.

"Let me finish! I propose we toss a coin, shake dice, whatever you like that distributes the probabilities evenly. If I win, I go free with what I've taken here — you furnish me safe-conduct and transportation home. You'll still have the knowledge that Dromm is going to attack, and some time to prepare. If you win, I surrender and cooperate with you. I have valuable information, and you can drug me to make sure I don't lie."

"No!" shouted one of the officers.

"Wait. Let me think. . . . I have to make an estimate." Wayland lowered his gun and stood with half-shut eyes. He looked as he had down in the traders' hall, and Ganch remembered uneasily that Wayland was a gambling analyst.

But there was little to lose. If he won, he went home with his booty; if he lost — he knew how to will his heart to stop beating.

Wayland looked up. There was a fever-gleam in his eyes. "Yes," he said.

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The others did not question him. They must be used to following a Tipster's advice blindly. But one of them asked how Ganch could be trusted. "I'll lay down my blaster when you produce the selection device," said the Dromman. "All the worlds know you do not cheat."

Chris reached into her pouched belt and drew out a deck of cards. Wordlessly, she shuffled them and gave them to her uncle. The spy put his gun on the floor. He half expected the others to rush him, but they stood where they were.

Wayland's hands shook as he cut the deck. He smiled crookedly. "One-eyed jack," he whispered. "Hard to beat."

He shuffled the cards again and held them out to Ganch. The armored fingers were clumsy, but they opened the deck.

It was the king of spades.

Stars blazed in a raw naked blackness. The engines which had eaten light-years were pulsing now on primary drive, gravitics, accelerating toward the red sun which lay three astronomical units ahead.

Ganch thought that the space distortions of the drive beams were lighting the fleet up like a nova for the Hermesian detectors. But you couldn't fight a battle at trans-light speeds, and their present objective was to seek the enemy out and destroy him.

Overcommandant wan Halsker peered into the viewscreens of the dreadnaught. There was something avid in his long gaunt face, but he spoke levelly: "I find it hard to believe. They actually gave you a speedster and let you go."

"I expected treachery myself, sir," answered Ganch deferentially. Despite promotion, he was still only the chief intelligence officer attached to Task Force One. "Surely, with their whole civilization at stake, any rational people would have — But their mores are unique. They always pay their gambling debts."

It was very quiet, down here in the bowels of the Supernova ship. A ring of technicians sat before their instruments, watching the dials unblinkingly. Wan Halsker's eyes never left the simulacrum of space in his screens, though all he saw was stars. There was too much emptiness around to show the 500 ships of his command, spread in careful formation through some billions of cubic kilometers.

A light glowed, and a technician said dully: "Contact made. *Turolin* engaging estimated five Meteor-class enemy vessels."

Wan Halsker allowed himself a snort. "Insects! Don't break formation; let the *Turolin* swat them as she proceeds."

Ganch sat waiting, rehearsing in his mind the principles of modern warfare. The gravity drive had radically changed them in the last few centuries. A forward vector could be killed almost instantane-

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ously, a new direction taken as fast, while internal pseudograv fields compensated for accelerations which would otherwise have crumpled a man. A fight in space was not unlike one in air, with this difference: that the velocities used were too high, the distances too great, the units involved too many, for a human brain to grasp. It had to be done by machine.

Subspace quivered with coded messages, the ships' own electronic minds transmitting information back to the prime computers on Dromm — the computers which laid out not only the overall strategy, but the tactics of every major engagement. A man could not follow that esoteric mathematics, he could only obey the monster he had built.

No change of orders came, a few torpedo ships were unimportant, and Task Force One continued.

Astran was a clinker, an airless valueless planet of a waning red dwarf star, but it housed a key base of the Hermesian Navy. With Astran reduced, wan Halsker's command could safely go on to rendezvous with six other fleets that had been taking care of their own assignments; the whole group would then continue to New Hermes herself, and just let the enemy dare try to stop them!

Such, in broad outline, was the plan; but only a hundred computers, each filling a large building, could handle all the details of strategy, tactics, and logistics.

Ganch had an uneasy feeling of being a very small cog in a very large machine. He didn't matter; the commandant didn't; the ship, the fleet, the gray mass of commoners didn't; only the Cadre, and above them the almighty State, had a real existence.

The Hermesians would need a lot of taming before they learned to think that way.

Now fire was exploding out in space, great guns cutting loose as the outnumbered force sought the invaders. Ganch felt a shuddering when the Supernova's own armament spoke. The ship's computer, her brain, flashed and chattered, the enormous vessel leaped on her gravity beams, ducking, dodging, spouting flame and hot metal. Stars spun on the screen in a lunatic dance. Ten thousand men aboard the ship had suddenly become robots feeding her guns.

"Compartment Seven hit . . . sealed off."

"Hit made on enemy Star-class, damage looks light."

"Number Forty-two gun out of action. Residual radioactivity . . . compartment sealed off."

Men died, scorched and burned, air sucked from their lungs as the armored walls peeled away, listening to the clack of radiation counters as leaden bulkheads locked them away like lepers. The Supernova trembled with each hit. Ganch heard steel shriek not far away and braced his body for death.

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Wan Halsker sat impassively, hands folded on his lap, watching the screens and the dials. There was nothing he could do; the ship fought herself, men were too slow. But he nodded after a while, a dark satisfaction in his eyes.

"We're sustaining damage," he said, "but no more than expected." He stared at a slim small crescent in the screen. "There's the planet. We're working in . . . we'll be in bombardment range soon."

The ships' individual computers made their decisions on the basis of information received; but they were constantly sending a digest of the facts back to their electronic masters on Dromm. So far no tactical change had been ordered, but —

Ganch frowned at the visual tank which gave a crude approximation of the reality ramping around him. The little red specks were his own ships, the green ones such of the enemy as had been spotted. It seemed to him that too many red lights had stopped twinkling, and that the Hermesian fireflies were driving a wedge into the formation. But there was nothing he could do.

A bell clanged. Change of orders! *Turolin* to withdraw three megakilometers toward Polaris, *Colfin* to swing around toward enemy Constellation Number Four, *Hardes* to — Watching the tank in a hypnotized way, Ganch decided vaguely it must be some attempt at a flanking movement. But there was a Hermesian squadron out there!

Well . . .

The battle snarled its way across vacuum. It was many hours before the Dromman computers gave up and flashed the command: Break contact, retreat in formation to Neering Base.

They had been outmaneuvered. Incredibly, New Hermes' machines had outthought Dromm's and the battle was lost.

Wayland entered the mapping room with a jaunty step that belied the haggardness in his face. Christabel Hesty looked up from her task of directing the integrators and cried aloud: "Will! I didn't expect you back so soon!"

"I thumbed a ride home with a courier ship," said Wayland. "Three months' leave. By that time the war will be over, so —" He sat down on her desk, swinging his short legs, and got out an old and incredibly foul pipe. "I'm just as glad, to tell the truth. Planetarism is all right in its place, but war's an ugly business."

There was something haunted in his eyes. A Hermesian withstood the military life better than most; he was used not only to moments of nerve-ripping suspense but to long and patient waiting. Wayland, though, had during the past year seen too many ships blown up, too many men dead or screaming with their wounds. His hands shook a little as he tamped the pipe full.

"Luck be praised you're alive!"

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"It hasn't been easy on you either, has it? Chained to a desk like this. Here, sit back and take a few minutes, off, the war can wait." Wayland kindled his tobacco and blew rich clouds. "But at least it never got close to our home, and our losses have been even lighter than expected."

"If you get occupation duty —"

"I'm afraid I will."

"Well, I want to come too. I've never been off this planet; it's disgraceful."

"Dromm is a pretty dreary place, I warn you. But Thanit is close by, of course — it used to be a gay world, it will be again, and every Hermesian will be Luck incarnate to them. Sure, I'll wangle an assignment for you."

Chris frowned. "Only three months to go, though? It's hard to believe."

"Two and a half is the official estimate. Look here." Wayland stumped over to the three-dimensional sector map, which was there only for the enlightenment of humans. The military computers dealt strictly in lists of numbers.

"See, we whipped them at the Cold Stars, and now a feint of ours is drawing what's left of them into Ransome's Nebula."

"Ransome's — oh, you mean the Queen of Clubs? Mmm-hm. And what's going to happen to them there?"

"Tch, tch. Official secrets, my dear inquisitive nieceling. But just imagine what *could* happen to a fleet concentrated in a mess of nebular dust that blocks their detectors!"

Wayland did not see Ganch again until he was stationed on Dromm. There he grumbled long and loudly about the climate, the food, and the tedious necessity of making sure that a subjugated enemy stayed subjugated. He looked forward to his next furlough on Thanit, and still more to rotation home in six months. Chris, being younger, enjoyed herself. They had no mountains on New Hermes, and she was going to climb Hell's Peak with Commander Gallery. About half a dozen other young officers would be jealously present, so her uncle felt she would be adequately chaperoned.

They were working together in the political office, interviewing Cadre men and disposing of their cases. Wayland was not sympathetic toward the prisoners. But when Ganch was led in, he felt a certain kinship and even smiled.

"Sit down," he invited. "Take it easy. I don't bite."

Ganch slumped into a chair before the desk and looked at the floor. He seemed as shattered as the rest of his class. They weren't really tough, thought Wayland; they couldn't stand defeat, most of them suicided rather than undergo psychorevision.

"Didn't expect to see you again,"

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he said. "I understood you were on combat duty, and — um —"

"I know," said Ganch lifelessly. "Our combat units averaged ninety per cent casualties, toward the end." In a rush of bitterness: "I wish I had been one of them."

"Take it easy," repeated Wayland. "We Hermesians aren't vindictive. Your planet will never have armed forces again — it'll join Corrid and Oberkassel as a protectorate of ours — but once we've straightened you out you'll be free to live as you please."

"Free!" mumbled Ganch.

He lifted tortured red eyes to the face before him, but shifted from its wintry smile to Chris. She had some warmth for him, at least.

"How did you do it?" he whispered. "I still don't understand. I thought you must have some new kind of computer, but our intelligence swore you didn't . . . and we outnumbered you, and there was all that information you let me take home, and —"

"We're gamblers," said the girl soberly.

"Yes, but —"

"Look at it this way," she went on. "War is a science, based on a complex paramathematical theory. All maneuvers and engagements are ordered with a view to gaining the maximum advantage for one's own side, in the light of known information. But of course, *all* the information is never available, so intelligent guesswork has to fill in the gaps.

"Well, a system exists for making such guesses and for deciding what move has the maximum probability of success. It applies to games, business, war — all competitive enterprises. It's called games theory."

"I —" Ganch's jaw dropped. He snapped it shut again and said desperately: "But that's elementary! It's been known for centuries."

"Of course," nodded Chris. "But New Hermes has based her whole economy on gambling — on probabilities, on games of skill where no player has all the information. Don't you see, it would make our entire intellectual interest turn toward games theory. And in fact we *had* to have a higher development of such knowledge, and a large class of men skilled in using it, or we could not maintain as complex a civilization as we do.

"No other planet has a comparable body of knowledge. And, while we haven't kept it secret, no other planet has men able to use that knowledge on its highest levels.

"Just take that night we caught you in the file room. If we cut cards with you, there was a fifty-fifty chance you'd go free. Will here had to estimate whether the overall probabilities justified the gamble. Because he decided they did, we three are alive today."

"But I *did* bring that material home!" cried Ganch.

"Yes," said the girl. "And the fact you had it was merely another item for our strategic computers

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to take into account. Indeed, it helped us: it was definite information about what *you* knew, and your actions became all the more predictable."

Laughter, gentle and unmocking, lay in her throat. "Never draw to an inside straight," she said. "And never play with a man who knows enough not to, when you don't."

Ganch sagged further down in his chair. He felt sick. He went through Wayland's questioning in a mechanical fashion, and heard sentence pronounced, and left under guard.

As he stumbled out, he heard Wayland say thoughtfully: "Three gets you four he suicides rather than take psychorevision."

"You're covered!" said Christabel.

The Ape at the Typewriter

Happen to me? I've always been a steady
Pensionable ape from a very respectable
Family — never late at the office — it's
Nonsense, it couldn't.

I've done my stint without stint at the typewriter
Eight hours a day, just like the Civil Service,
For years (some say for a million) and nothing,
Thank heaven, to show for it.

And here I am within a fortnight of retiring
To my Wee Tree Toppe along the Kingston By-pass,
And It has happened: *Elsinore. A platform*
Before the Castle.

What can I do? Here comes the supervisor!
Don't let him see *Francisco at his post*, oh,
He's stopping beside me. For Darwin's sake don't *Enter*
To him Bernardo.

Happen to me? I think I've learnt my lesson.
There he was looking over my left shoulder,
And I'd swear he — but *he* was murmuring, quite happily,
"Nonsense, as usual."

PATRIC DICKENSON

"The Ape at the Typewriter," reprinted by permission of the Proprietors of "Punch"

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITOR

J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S FANTASY-ADVENTURE novel THE TWO TOWERS (Houghton Mifflin, $5*) is approximately as long as three issues of this magazine, and it is only a fragment, the mid-section of a trilogy with the over-all title of THE LORD OF THE RINGS of which Part I: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING was even longer.

There is no denying that this makes inordinate demands upon the patience of its readers, or that it often does so needlessly: whole paragraphs or even chapters could be lopped away without affecting form or content. But it is equally impossible to deny that no writer save E. R. Eddison has ever so satisfactorily and compellingly created his own mythology and made it come vividly alive.

This is a world of wizards and monsters and (God love them!) hobbits, a world of epic battles and parlous journeys and gentle fireside humor, all described in some of the most sheerly beautiful prose (and occasional verse) that this harsh decade has seen in print.

The volumes of the trilogy are not self-sufficient: this one ends on as unresolved a note of peril as a Pearl White serial, and begins with events incomprehensible to anyone who has not read Part I. Unfortunately that first volume, THE FELLOWSHIP, is already out of print. I'd suggest you beg or steal a copy of I, buy II at once before it too is unavailable, grab III (THE RETURN OF THE RING) as soon as it comes out, probably this Fall, and then settle down for a week or a month to read nothing else but this epic of enchantment. "No fiction I have read in the last five years," says W. H. Auden, "has given me more joy"; and all but the most literal-minded (who are not reading this column) and the most acutely impatient should agree with him.

Outstanding among the latest volumes of science fiction is John Wyndham's RE-BIRTH (Ballantine, $2*; paper, 35c). Indeed, in a so far undistinguished year, it's rivaled only by Arthur C. Clarke's EARTHLIGHT in its combination of literary skill with solid thinking about the future. Its theme will hardly be unfamiliar to any s.f. reader: the problems of a group of telepathic children in a post-atomic culture (isolated in Labrador) which has made a fanatic religious cult out of preserving the "pure" human strain without any

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trace of mutation. But just as last year the theme of alien observers, which all critics thought hopelessly outworn, came to life again through the warm, subtle and convincing treatments of Edgar Pangborn and Chad Oliver, so Wyndham makes something completely fresh and moving out of his telepathic mutants — partly by the accumulation of minutely plausible detail at which he has always excelled, partly by a greater depth and maturity than he has shown in previous novels.

Philip K. Dick's SOLAR LOTTERY (Ace, 35c) is kept from a Grade A rating only by a tendency, in both its nicely contrasted plots, to dwindle away at the end. This first novel by one of the most interesting new magazine writers (one of F&SF's discoveries, I may add proudly) creates a strange and highly convincing and self-consistent future society, peculiarly governed by Games Theory and the principle of randomness; against this background, built up with the detail of a Heinlein and the satire of a Kornbluth, it relates a taut melodrama of political conflict and a stirring space-quest to rediscover a lost tenth planet. The same Ace double-volume contains the first book-appearance of a 1953 novel from *Space Stories* by Leigh Brackett, THE BIG JUMP — more of a realistic adventure than Brackett's usual romances, with tight and exciting plotting and a finale of odd imaginative beauty.

The other new s.f. novels can be lumped together as run-of-the-millennia. David Duncan's BEYOND EDEN (Ballantine, $2*; paper, 35c), F. L. Wallace's ADDRESS: CENTAURI (Gnome, $3*; expanded from the 1952 *Galaxy* novella *Accidental Flight*) and STAR BRIDGE by Jack Williamson and James E. Gunn (Gnome, $3*) will all do, I suppose, for evenings when you're clean out of s.f. and *must* read some; but they seem, to me at least, pretty lifeless fiction, in which both prose and characterization emerge directly from the machine, untouched by human hands.

There's nothing machine-made about the 12 short stories and novelets by H. L. Gold collected as THE OLD DIE RICH AND OTHER SCIENCE FICTION STORIES (Crown, $3*). They're individual tales of odd notions (largely sheer fantasy, despite the title), often proving once again that Mr. Gold is almost the only s.f. writer capable of creating lower and lower-middle class backgrounds (a relief, after all of s.f.'s potentates, plutocrats and technological elite). Unfortunately most of these stories are simply not up to the standards of craftsmanship which Editor Gold sets for others in *Galaxy*. The construction is apt to be episodic, the story-line veering, and the author seems to have no understanding of the rigorous demands of imaginative logic; the contradictory and confusing title story is, for instance, a very model of how not to develop a promising time-travel notion.

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The only new anthology is actually a combination of three old ones. FRONTIERS IN SPACE (Bantam, 25c) is a best-of-the-best selection of 14 stories from Everett F. Bleiler and T. E. Dikty's THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES: 1951, 1952 and 1953. These include such modern classics from *Galaxy* as Damon Knight's *To Serve Man*, from *Astounding* as Alfred Bester's *Oddy and Id*, and from this magazine as Bill Brown's *Star Ducks* and Zenna Henderson's *Ararat;* and where you'll get better value I don't know.

In non-fiction, I shouldn't need to do more than mention the fact that there's a new book by Arthur C. Clarke: THE EXPLORATION OF THE MOON (Harper, $2.50*). The text is brief, but extraordinarily clear and comprehensive; the 45 plates by R. A. Smith, covering each step of the immediate space-future from the launching of an unmanned satellite to the moon-based preparations for the first Martian flight, give the British artist a rank beside Bonestell for combining realism, instruction and beauty. In short, this is recommended as a library essential — as is another non-fiction volume: AN ADVENTURE, by C. A. E. Moberly and E. F. Jourdain (Coward-McCann, $3*). Every s.f. enthusiast knows the story of the two Englishwomen who, strolling through Versailles in 1901, slipped momentarily through some time-fault back to the days of Marie Antoinette; readers who know the case from constant allusions now have a chance to go back to the original firsthand account. In this, the fifth edition, Joan Evans has collated the text of the 1911 first edition with the MS versions and added valuable and living character sketches of the two authors. I wouldn't say that this new version supplants the fourth edition. Both belong in the library of anyone interested in improbable truth.

To close this column, as it began, with pure non-galactic fantasy, I urge you to investigate Elisabeth Sanxay Holding's MISS KELLY (Morrow, $2.50*), reissue of a 1947 story of a cat who understands and speaks human language but knows better than to reveal her talents — until dramatic circumstances force her to do so, with unexpected results. It's one of those too-rare juvenile fantasies with delightful appeal to the adult connoisseur; and Margaret S. Johnson's pictures are worthy of the text. And as fine a barrel of monkeyshines as the season is apt to produce is the batch of 91 Ozark folk tales collected by Vance Randolph as THE DEVIL'S PRETTY DAUGHTER (Columbia University, $3.75*), with illustrations by Glen Rounds and folkloristic notes by Herbert Halpert. Largely supernatural, often bawdy, sometimes chilling, always vastly entertaining, these are wonderful evidence that the anonymous folk-spirit can still give cards and spades to most other creators of fantasy.

* Books marked with an asterisk may be obtained through F&SF's Book Service. See page 128.

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"If ever," Ray Bradbury wrote in a recent letter, "I could safely predict a large, a very large future for anyone, it is for Charles Beaumont." That I'm in full agreement is evidenced by the fact that this is the sixth Beaumont story in F&SF in something over a year; it's obviously an editor's duty to publish as many Beaumont stories as possible before, like Bradbury, he is Discovered by the major slicks and begins selling each story for more than the entire budget of any s.f. magazine. I don't think you'll find many stories combining such a disturbing start and such a joyous ending as this touching fable of

The Vanishing American

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

He got the notion shortly after 5 o'clock; at least, a part of him did, a small part hidden down beneath all the conscious cells — *he* didn't get the notion until some time later. At exactly 5 P.M. the bell rang. At two minutes after, the chairs began to empty. There was the vast slamming of drawers, the straightening of rulers, the sound of bones snapping and mouths yawning and feet shuffling tiredly.

Mr. Minchell relaxed. He rubbed his hands together and relaxed and thought now nice it would be to get up and go home, like the others. But of course there was the tape, only three-quarters finished. He would have to stay.

He stretched and said good night to the people that filed past him. As usual, no one answered. When they had gone, he set his fingers pecking again over the keyboard. The click-clicking grew loud in the suddenly still office, but Mr. Minchell did not notice. He was lost in the work. Soon, he knew, it would be time for the totaling, and his pulse quickened at the thought of this.

He lit a cigarette. Heart tapping, he drew in smoke and released it.

He extended his right hand and rested his index and middle fingers on the metal bar marked TOTAL. A mile-long ribbon of paper lay gathered on the desk, strangely festive. He glanced at it, then at the manifest sheet. The figure 18037448 was circled in red. He pulled breath into his lungs, locked it there; then he closed his eyes and pressed the TOTAL bar.

There was a smooth low metallic

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grinding, followed by absolute silence.

Mr. Minchell opened one eye, dragged it from the ceiling on down to the adding machine.

He groaned, slightly.

The total read: 18037447.

"God." He stared at the figure and thought of the 53 pages of manifest, the 3,000 separate rows of figures that would have to be checked again. "God."

The day was lost, now. Irretrievably. It was too late to do anything. Madge would have supper waiting, and F. J. didn't approve of overtime; also —

He looked at the total again. At the last two digits.

He sighed. 47. And thought, startled: Today, for the Lord's sake, is my birthday! Today I am 40 — what? 47. And that explains the mistake, I suppose. Subconscious kind of thing . . .

Slowly he got up and looked around the deserted office.

Then he went to the dressing room and got his hat and his coat and put them on, carefully.

"*Pushing fifty now* . . ."

The outside hall was dark. Mr. Minchell walked softly to the elevator and punched the *down* button. "Forty-seven," he said, aloud; then, almost immediately, the light turned red and the thick door slid back noisily. The elevator operator, a bird-thin, tan-fleshed girl, swiveled her head, looking up and down the hall. "Going down," she said.

"Yes," Mr. Minchell said, stepping forward.

"Going down." The girl clicked her tongue and muttered, "Damn kids." She gave the lattice gate a tired push and moved the smooth wooden-handled lever in its slot.

Odd, Mr. Minchell decided, was the word for this particular girl. He wished now that he had taken the stairs. Being alone with only one other person in an elevator had always made him nervous: now it made him very nervous. He felt the tension growing. When it became unbearable, he cleared his throat and said, "Long day."

The girl said nothing. She had a surly look, and she seemed to be humming something deep in her throat.

Mr. Minchell closed his eyes. In less than a minute — during which time he dreamed of the cable snarling, of the car being caught between floors, of himself trying to make small talk with the odd girl for six straight hours — he opened his eyes again and walked into the lobby, briskly.

The gate slammed.

He turned and started for the doorway. Then he paused, feeling a sharp increase in his heartbeat. A large, red-faced, magnificently groomed man of middle years stood directly beyond the glass, talking with another man.

Mr. Minchell pushed through the door, with effort. He's seen me now, he thought. If he asks any questions,

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though, or anything, I'll just say I didn't put it on the time card; that ought to make it all right. . . .

He nodded and smiled at the large man. "Good night, Mr. Diemel."

The man looked up briefly, blinked, and returned to his conversation.

Mr. Minchell felt a burning come into his face. He hurried on down the street. Now the notion — though it was not even that yet, strictly: it was more a vague feeling — swam up from the bottom of his brain. He remembered that he had not spoken directly to F. J. Diemel for over ten years, beyond a good morning. . . .

Ice-cold shadows fell off the tall buildings, staining the streets, now. Crowds of shoppers moved along the pavement like juggernauts, exhaustedly, but with great determination. Mr. Minchell looked at them. They all had furtive appearances, it seemed to him, suddenly, even the children, as if each was fleeing from some hideous crime. They hurried along, staring.

But not, Mr. Minchell noticed, at him. Through him, yes. Past him. As the elevator operator had done, and now F. J. And had anyone said good night?

He pulled up his coat collar and walked toward the drugstore, thinking. He was 47 years old. At the current life-expectancy rate, he might have another seventeen or eighteen years left. And then death.

If you're not dead already.

He paused and for some reason remembered a story he'd once read in a magazine. Something about a man who dies and whose ghost takes up his duties, or something; anyway, the man didn't know he was dead — that was it. And at the end of the story, he runs into his own corpse.

Which is pretty absurd: he glanced down at his body. Ghosts don't wear $36 suits, nor do they have trouble pushing doors open, nor do their corns ache like blazes, and what the devil is wrong with me today?

He shook his head.

It was the tape, of course, and the fact that it was his birthday. That was why his mind was behaving so foolishly.

He went into the drugstore. It was an immense place, packed with people. He walked to the cigar counter, trying not to feel intimidated, and reached into his pocket. A small man elbowed in front of him and called loudly: "Gimme coupla nickels, will you, Jack?" The clerk scowled and scooped the change out of his cash register. The small man scurried off. Others took his place. Mr. Minchell thrust his arm forward. "A pack of Luckies, please," he said. The clerk whipped his fingers around a pile of cellophaned packages and, looking elsewhere, droned: "Twenty-six." Mr. Minchell put his twenty-six cents exactly on the glass shelf. The clerk shoved the cigarettes toward the edge and picked up the money,

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deftly. Not once did he lift his eyes.

Mr. Minchell pocketed the Luckies and went back out of the store. He was perspiring now, slightly, despite the chill wind. The word *ridiculous* lodged in his mind and stayed there. Ridiculous, yes, for Heaven's sake. Still, he thought — now just answer the question — isn't it true? Can you honestly say that that clerk saw you?

Or that anyone saw you today?

Swallowing dryly, he walked another two blocks, always in the direction of the subway, and went into a bar called the Chez When. One drink would not hurt, one small, stiff, steadying shot.

The bar was a gloomy place, and not very warm, but there was a good crowd. Mr. Minchell sat down on a stool and folded his hands. The bartender was talking animatedly with an old woman, laughing with boisterous good humor from time to time. Mr. Minchell waited. Minutes passed. The bartender looked up several times, but never made a move to indicate that he had seen a customer.

Mr. Minchell looked at his old gray overcoat, the humbly floraled tie, the cheap sharkskin suit-cloth, and became aware of the extent to which he detested this ensemble. He sat there and detested his clothes for a long time. Then he glanced around. The bartender was wiping a glass, slowly.

All right, the hell with you. I'll go somewhere else.

He slid off the stool. Just as he was about to turn he saw the mirrored wall, pink-tinted and curved. He stopped, peering. Then he almost ran out of the bar.

Cold wind went into his head.

Ridiculous. The mirror was curved, you jackass. How do you expect to see yourself in curved mirrors?

He walked past high buildings, and now past the library and the stone lion he had once, long ago, named King Richard; and he did not look at the lion, because he'd always wanted to ride the lion, ever since he was a child, and he'd promised himself he would do that, but he never did.

He hurried on to the subway, took the stairs by twos, and clattered across the platform in time to board the Express.

It roared and thundered. Mr. Minchell held onto the strap and kept himself from staring. No one watched him. No one even glanced at him when he pushed his way to the door and went out onto the empty platform.

He waited. Then the train was gone, and he was alone.

He walked up the stairs. It was fully night now, a soft, unshadowed darkness. He thought about the day and the strange things that were gouging into his mind and thought about all this as he turned down a familiar street which led to his familiar apartment.

The door opened.

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His wife was in the kitchen, he could see. Her apron flashed across the arch, and back, and across. He called: "Madge, I'm home."

Madge did not answer. Her movements were regular. Jimmy was sitting at the table, drooling over a glass of pop, whispering to himself.

"I said —" Mr. Minchell began.

"Jimmy, get up and go to the bathroom, you hear? I've got your water drawn."

Jimmy promptly broke into tears. He jumped off the chair and ran past Mr. Minchell into the bedroom. The door slammed viciously.

"Madge."

Madge Minchell came into the room, tired and lined and heavy. Her eyes did not waver. She went into the bedroom, and there was a silence; then a sharp slapping noise, and a yelling.

Mr. Minchell walked to the bathroom, fighting down the small terror. He closed the door and locked it and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Ridiculous, he thought, and ridiculous and ridiculous. I am making something utterly foolish out of nothing. All I have to do is look in the mirror, and —

He held the handkerchief to his lips. It was difficult to breathe.

Then he knew that he was afraid, more so than ever before in a lifetime of being afraid.

Look at it this way, Minchell: why shouldn't *you vanish?*

"Young man, just you wait until your father gets here!"

He pushed the handkerchief against his mouth and leaned on the door and gasped.

"*What do you mean, vanish?*"

Go on, take a look. You'll see what I mean.

He tried to swallow, couldn't. Tried to wet his lips, they stayed dry.

"*Lord* —"

He slitted his eyes and walked to the shaving mirror and looked in.

His mouth fell open.

The mirror reflected nothing. It held nothing. It was dull and gray and empty.

Mr. Minchell stared at the glass, put out his hand, drew it back hastily.

He squinted. Inches away. There was a form now: vague, indistinct, featureless: but a form.

"Lord," he said. He understood why the elevator girl hadn't seen him, and why F. J. hadn't answered him, and why the clerk at the drugstore and the bartender and Madge . . .

"*I'm not dead.*"

Of course you're not dead — not that way.

"— tan your hide, Jimmy Minchell, when he gets home."

Mr. Minchell suddenly wheeled and clicked the lock. He rushed out of the steam-filled bathroom, across the room, down the stairs, into the street, into the cool night.

A block from home he slowed to a walk.

Invisible! He said the word over

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and over, in a half-voice. He said it and tried to control the panic that pulled at his legs, and at his brain, and filled him.

Why?

A fat woman and a little girl passed by. Neither of them looked up. He started to call out and checked himself. No. That wouldn't do any good. There was no question about it now. He was invisible.

He walked on. As he did, forgotten things returned; they came and they left, too fast. He couldn't hold onto them. He could only watch, and remember. Himself as a youngster, reading: the Oz books, and Tarzan, and Mr. Wells. Himself, going to the University, wanting to teach, and meeting Madge; then not planning any more, and Madge changing, and all the dreams put away. For later. For the right time. And then Jimmy — little strange Jimmy, who ate filth and picked his nose and watched television, who never read books, never; Jimmy, his son, whom he would never understand . . .

He walked by the edge of the park now. Then on past the park, through a maze of familiar and unfamiliar neighborhoods. Walking, remembering, looking at the people and feeling pain because he knew that they could not see him, not now or ever again, because he had vanished. He walked and remembered and felt pain.

All the stagnant dreams came back. Fully. The trip to Italy he'd planned. The open sports car, bad weather be damned. The first-hand knowledge that would tell him whether he did or did not approve of bull fighting. The book . . .

Then something occurred to him. It occurred to Mr. Minchell that he had not just suddenly vanished, like that, after all. No; he had been vanishing gradually for a long while. Every time he said good morning to that bastard Diemel he got a little harder to see. Every time he put on this horrible suit he faded. The process of disappearing was set into action every time he brought his paycheck home and turned it over to Madge, every time he kissed her, or listened to her vicious unending complaints, or decided against buying that novel, or punched the adding machine he hated so, or . . .

Certainly.

He had vanished for Diemel and the others in the office years ago. And for strangers right afterwards. Now even Madge and Jimmy couldn't see him. And he could barely see himself, even in a mirror.

It made terrible sense to him. *Why* shouldn't *you disappear?* Well, why, indeed? There wasn't any very good reason, actually. None. And this, in a nightmarish sort of a way, made it as brutally logical as a perfect tape.

Then he thought about going back to work tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. He'd have to, of course. He couldn't let Madge and Jimmy starve; and,

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besides, what else would he do? It wasn't as if anything important had changed. He'd go on punching the clock and saying good morning to people who didn't see him, and he'd run the tapes and come home beat, nothing altered, and some day he'd die and that would be that.

All at once he felt tired.

He sat down on a cement step and sighed. Distantly he realized that he had come to the library. He sat there, watching the people, feeling the tiredness seep through him, thickly.

Then he looked up.

Above him, black and regal against the sky, stood the huge stone lion. Its mouth was open, and the great head was raised proudly.

Mr. Minchell smiled: King Richard. Memories scattered in his mind: old King Richard, well, my God, here we are.

He got to his feet. Fifty thousand times, at least, he had passed this spot, and every time he had experienced that instant of wild craving. Less so of late, but still, had it ever completely gone? He was amazed to find that now the childish desire was welling up again, stronger than ever before. Urgently.

He rubbed his cheek and stood there for several minutes. It's the most ridiculous thing in the world, he thought, and I must be going out of my mind, and that must explain everything. But, he inquired of himself, even so, why not?

After all, I'm invisible. No one can see me. Of course, it didn't have to be this way, not really. I don't know, he went on, I mean, I believed that I was doing the right thing. Would it have been right to go back to the University and the hell with Madge? I couldn't change that, could I? Could I have done anything about that, even if I'd known?

He nodded sadly.

All right, but don't make it any worse. Don't for God's sake *dwell* on it!

To his surprise, Mr. Minchell found that he was climbing up the concrete base of the statue. It ripped the breath from his lungs — and he saw that he could much more easily have gone up a few extra steps and simply stepped on — but there didn't seem anything else to do but just this, what he was doing. Once upright, he passed his hand over the statue's flank. The surface was incredibly sleek and cold, hard as a lion's muscles ought to be, and tawny.

He took a step backwards. Lord! Had there ever been such power? Such marvelous downright power and . . . majesty, as was here? From stone — no, indeed. It fooled a good many people, but it did not fool Mr. Minchell. He knew. This lion was no mere library decoration. It was an animal, of deadly cunning and fantastic strength and unbelievable ferocity. And it didn't move for the simple reason that it did not care to move. It was waiting.

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Some day it would see what it was waiting for, its enemy, coming down the street. Then look out, people!

He remembered the whole yarn now. Of everyone on Earth, only he, Henry Minchell, knew the secret of the lion. And only he was allowed to sit astride this mighty back.

He stepped onto the tail, experimentally. He hesitated, gulped, and swung forward, swiftly, on up to the curved rump.

Trembling, he slid forward, until finally he was over the shoulders of the lion, just behind the raised head.

His breath came very fast.

He closed his eyes.

It was not long before he was breathing regularly again. Only now it was the hot, fetid air of the jungle that went into his nostrils. He felt the great muscles ripple beneath him and he listened to the fast crackle of crushed foliage, and he whispered:

"Easy, fellow."

The flying spears did not frighten him. He sat straight, smiling, with his fingers buried in the rich, tawny mane of King Richard, while the wind tore at his hair. . . .

Then, abruptly, he opened his eyes.

The city stretched before him, and the people, and the lights. He tried quite hard not to cry, because he knew that forty-seven-year-old men never cried, not even when they had vanished, but he couldn't help it. So he sat on the stone lion and lowered his head and cried.

He didn't hear the laughter at first.

When he did hear it, he thought that he was dreaming. But it was true: somebody was laughing.

He grasped one of the statue's ears for balance and leaned forward. He blinked. Below, some fifteen feet, there were people. Young people. Some of them with books. They were looking up and smiling and laughing.

Mr. Minchell wiped his eyes.

A slight horror came over him, and fell away. He leaned farther out.

One of the boys waved and shouted: "Ride him, Pop!"

Mr. Minchell almost toppled. Then, without understanding, without even trying to understand — merely knowing — he grinned, widely, showing his teeth, which were his own and very white.

"You . . . see me?" he called.

The young people roared.

"You do!" Mr. Minchell's face seemed to melt upwards. He let out a yell and gave King Richard's shaggy stone mane an enormous hug.

Below, other people stopped in their walking and a small crowd began to form. Dozens of eyes peered sharply, quizzically.

A woman in gray furs giggled.

A thin man in a blue suit grunted something about these damned exhibitionists.

"You pipe down," another man said. "Guy wants to ride the goddamn lion it's his own business."

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There were murmurings. The man who had said pipe down was small and he wore black-rimmed glasses. "I used to do it all the time." He turned to Mr. Minchell and cried: "How is it?"

Mr. Minchell grinned. Somehow, he realized, in some mysterious way, he had been given a second chance. And this time he knew what he would do with it. "Fine!" he shouted, and stood up on King Richard's back and sent his derby spinning out over the heads of the people. "Come on up!"

"Can't do it," the man said. "Got a date." There was a look of profound admiration in his eyes as he strode off. Away from the crowd he stopped and cupped his hands and cried: "I'll be seeing you!"

"That's right," Mr. Minchell said, feeling the cold new wind on his face. "You'll be seeing me."

Later, when he was good and ready, he got down off the lion.

Come All Ye!

The 13th World Science Fiction Convention, to be held in Cleveland over the Labor Day weekend from Friday September 2 to Monday September 5, has already lined up a highly tempting batch of attractions — just as if the crazy and delightful goodfellowship of a convention weren't attraction enough by itself. Isaac Asimov as Guest of Honor, Mark Clifton and James E. Gunn among the featured speakers, a series of Oscar-like awards for outstanding science fiction, a symposium of book- and magazine-collectors (with display of their top rarities), a masquerade ball, a hotel (the Manger) devoted exclusively to the convention, probably a semi-professional production of a new s.f. play. . . . Send your $2 registration fee now to the Convention, P.O. Box 508, Edgewater Branch, Cleveland 7, Ohio, and get the Progress Reports giving the latest plans. See you at the banquet, where your toastmaster will be ANTHONY BOUCHER

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It's a long-standing rule of s. f. magazines that the same author shall not appear twice in one issue . . . under the same name. If you observe the formality of using assorted aliases, of course, there's no limit to how much one writer may dominate an issue. There've been great issues of Astounding *written mostly by Heinlein; Rog Phillips has created singlehanded virtually entire issues of* Amazing; *and there was one memorable occasion on which* Thrilling Wonder *printed two Bradbury stories, one as by Bradbury and one by Brett Sterling . . . the Name-conscious fans all loved the Bradbury, and decided Sterling was a negligible hack. But in this issue of* F&SF *you've read a story by Poul Anderson and one by Gordon R. Dickson — and now you are about to read one by Poul Anderson* and *Gordon R. Dickson. The reason for this violation of tradition is simple: Anderson-Dickson is, by some curious chemistry of collaboration, a wholly different author from either Anderson or Dickson. Separately, each can write stories of many different and admirable types, including the straightforward sociocultural science fiction you've just read by Anderson or the sensitive human-interest mood-piece by Dickson; but together they (God bless and keep them!) write about the Hokas. Only a collaborative force that is greater than the sum of the collaborators could have created those inimitable imitators, those eager-beaver bears, or provided them with such adventures as this — in which you will meet the Hokan Foreign Legion, and its enemies who do battle with scissors, eggbeaters . . . and tiddlywinks.*

The Tiddlywink Warriors

by POUL ANDERSON *and*
GORDON R. DICKSON

THE WHOLE TROUBLE BEGAN WITH Jorkins Brassard, Cultural Development Inspector from Earth Headquarters of the Interbeing League. Or perhaps you should blame the bureaucratic tradition in general. But a rigid set of rules is necessary if the League is to civilize some thousands of new planets in a gradual and humane fashion. Therefore the blame goes back to the inventors of gravity control and the faster-

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than-light secondary drive. However, if they had not done what they did, history would have been different and Alexander Jones would never have been born. This is getting us nowhere, so we shall leave the onus on the well-meaning but dogmatic head of Jorkins Brassard.

His tour of the frontier worlds had brought him, complete with military escort, to Toka, where he landed in the city Mixumaxu. This was the seat of Earth's plenipotentiary, counselor and troubleshooter on the native Hokas' exuberant path to full development and League membership. The subspace radio had announced his coming, and preparations consonant with his exalted rank had been made.

Emerging from his ship, Brassard blinked in the hot sunshine. He was a balding red-faced man, sweaty in dress uniform, with a promising potbelly that he yanked in whenever he remembered it. A score of crisp young marines followed. They paused on the gangway and stared in most unmilitary stupefaction.

They had seen stereos of the Hokas, golden-furred beings with teddy bear heads, half the height and almost twice the width of a human. They had heard weird rumors about them, as being highly intelligent and imaginative, eager to adopt the new culture but following out every hint they got with a wholehearted single-mindedness that could have maddening results. But they had not been expecting a double column of knights in full armor, mounted on dinosaurian monstrosities, sitting rigid with lances aloft except when someone broke formation to oil himself.

A group of Hokas trotted up and surrounded the Earthmen as these came slowly down to the field. This bunch wore scarlet coats, purple capes, blue trousers with gold frogging, jackboots with spurs, cocked hats, and ceremonial swords. They were preceded by a Scottish bagpipe corps.

Their leader bowed so his black nose almost touched the ground. "Welcome to Toka, sirs," he squeaked in fluent English.

"Uh . . . thank you . . . but who are these?" Brassard waved at the knights.

"Those are your honor guard, sir," beamed the chief. His breast glittered blindingly with medals. "There was some argument over who should have the privilege. It nearly came to a fight between the United States Cavalry and the Varangian Guard. But then King Arthur allied himself with the Black Watch and overawed the others."

"I see," murmured Brassard faintly. He knew there were dozens of different civilizations on this planet, each started by a League cultural mission or a chance book. "But who are you?"

"Oh, we're the Secret Service. Now, if you please, sir, we'll take you to His Excellency."

It was a slow ride through the old

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city's narrow, cobbled streets, under peaked tile roofs and between cheering crowds, to the metal and plastic tower of the League office. The vehicle was a perfectly good electric groundcar, but protocol seemed to demand it should be drawn by the reptilian "horses." Brassard and his men sighed with relief when they had got past a native sentry in full Samurai costume and into the cool interior of the new building.

The plenipotentiary, Alexander Jones, met them in the reception room. He was a slender snub-nosed young man with a chronically worried look; his dress clothes were neat but his light-brown hair seemed incorrigibly tousled. After the formalities, he apologized: "I'm afraid my wife isn't here, Inspector. We'll have to bach it. But I have an excellent Hoka chef — hired him away from Louis XIV."

"Oh," said Brassard. Recovering himself: "Doesn't matter. Just here to check up. Routine. I'll want to see your records, visit a few spots, make a report to EHQ." He sighed and sipped his aperitif with an air of cosmic responsibility. "Earthman's burden. Not easy. Sure you understand."

"Of course," said Alex, and wondered if it would be mutual.

Tanni Jones was a loyal wife, as well as a blonde and beautiful one, but she had declared that one more official function would unfunction her. Alex sympathized and suggested they send the children to the Hoka London to watch Parliament; he had hopes of government careers for them, and this was an unparalleled education in how not to conduct such business. "And maybe you'd like to take a flitter and run outsystem."

"Yes." Tanni smoothed her dress over her hips and winced. "I've been meaning to go to Gelkar anyway, the reconditioning center."

"What off Earth for?" demanded Alex.

"Do you realize I've put on three kilos?" she answered. "None of my clothes will fit me any longer. I can get a ten-day treatment there."

Alex could see no difference in her, but had been married long enough not to admit that. She did have a slight tendency to plumpness, and fought it bitterly. "All right," he agreed, and went on to instruct her in the handling of a spaceship: run or normal gravs till well out of the system, then switch to secondary for the two-day voyage to Gelkar, and always trust your autopilot no matter what your senses tell you. She had flown before, but Alex had firm prejudices.

He saw her off and went back to prepare for Brassard's arrival.

The bureaucrat went through his files first, a dull business. They had been at it for a day, and it was four days after Tanni's departure, when the news of catastrophe came.

Alex was sitting and smoking in a heap of papers, listening to acrid

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criticism of his methods. "Not done at all. You know very well census figures should be under P for Population. Cross-reference. Regulations." At that, he was getting off lightly.

The Secret Service chief came into the office on the run, tangled with his sword, and skidded across the floor. Somehow he got his round head firmly jammed into the wastebasket. Alex dragooned Brassard into pulling on the legs while he held the container. The Hoka emerged with a pop and looked wildly around.

"Sabotage!" he hissed.

"Never mind," said Alex. "What is it?"

The beady eyes glittered suspiciously at Brassard. "Has he been cleared?"

The inspector huffed. "Of course I've been cleared."

The chief scratched his head. "But have the people who cleared you been cleared?" he asked.

"Never mind," sighed Alex. "I'll vouch for him."

The chief looked under the desk, opened a few cabinet drawers, and checked under the tenth-story window. Then he came back and drew Alex's ear down to his muzzle. Cupping his hands, he whispered hoarsely: "Visio call for you, sir."

"Oh." Alex was hardened, after a dozen years on Toka. "Excuse me, Mr. Brassard." He went out, took a gravshaft to the fifth level, and tuned in the buzzing subspatial transceiver.

Tanni's face swam into the screen. It was streaked with dirt, her long golden hair was tangled, and tears furrowed the dust. In the background, against the flitter control panel, Alex saw a squat non-human figure with what appeared to be a weapon.

"Oh, Alex!" wailed Tanni.

His initial horror lessened when he realized she was unhurt. And at least the boat's communicator was working. "What happened?"

"I . . . I've crashed," she said.

Alex gaped. "Where?"

"On Telko —"

"How in space did that happen?" he yelped.

"I tried to . . . to cut in past the sun to build up speed," she snuffled. "I came too close, and it was either fall in toward Telko or overload the cooling system —"

Alex snorted indignantly. "How many times have I told you to lay off that close-orbit stunt? Women astrogators!"

Tanni wiped her eyes. "I tried to land for another start," she went on shakily. "Northern peninsula . . . b-but you know I c-c-can't land without a GCA beam."

Alex glowered. "How badly is it damaged?"

"Th-the flitter? I don't know. It just w-w-won't fly."

"Well," grumbled Alex, "broadcast a signal so I can find you. I'll get you in the courier boat."

"Yes . . ." whispered Tanni. "And come quick, darling."

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His fears stirred anew. "Is something really wrong?"

"The — the natives."

"Are they threatening you?" shouted Alex. His heart popped into his mouth. The natives of Telko had not molested the few visitors to their planet so far, but they were known to be warlike.

"No-o-o-o!" wailed Tanni. "Worse!"

"*Worse?*"

"They think I'm a — a god, or a mascot, or something."

"Well," he asked slowly, "what's wrong with that?"

"But they keep feeding me and feeding me. They won't let me eat the boat supplies. They almost stuff their own food down my mouth. It was all I could do to be allowed to come here and call you."

"Oh . . . that's all right," said Alex with a shudder of relief. "Telkan food has vitamin deficiencies, but a few days of it won't hurt you."

"But there's something in it! High calories or something. I'm putting on kilos and kilos. Alex, you've got to come right away!"

"You ought to be glad it's not poisoned," said the man unfeelingly. Most of him was turned to the worried planning of a rescue expedition. A few raythrowers would get rid of the Telks if they'd not listen to reason, but it could be a ticklish operation.

Tanni burst into tears and softened his heart. "It's all right, dear," he said soothingly. "Remember, Inspector Brassard is here with a military escort. We'll pull you out in a couple of days at most."

The Telk in the background laid an impatient hand on her shoulder. She gulped and blew a trembling kiss. Then she was led out of sight.

It was ridiculous, really. Telko was in the same planetary system as Toka, being the next world sunward. But Alex, on speaking terms with the natives of planets a thousand light-years removed, had never been there and knew almost nothing about it. Nobody did.

The reason, though, was simple. Telko was a hot, cloudy world with a voracious life, terrestroid to only six points of classification. That meant you wouldn't be killed outright by eating its food, but you would suffer from the complete lack of Vitamins A, B, C and E.

Furthermore, the natives were an unpromising lot. On their single continent, they had only one language, its dialects mutually comprehensible; but they were split into thousand of tribes with wildly different cultures. One point all the Telks had in common: they loved battle. It was instinctive, a hangover from ages when they had fought wild beasts barehanded. Unless he could take something sharp-edged at least once a month and go out and kill somebody, a Telk pined away.

So, after a few scientific studies,

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they were left alone. They were certainly not a race among whom you'd want to park your wife.

Alex came into the office at full speed. Brassard looked up from a sheaf of reports and asked querulously: "What's this about the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle?"

"Tanni—" panted Alex.

"Don't interrupt me! I want to know. Important to get serious xenological survey of original autochthonous culture. How else can we know best course for natives? Here I—don't interrupt, I say! —I have report from xenologist. Tried to study untouched Hoka village. Took statistics, asked questions, standard approved methods. Comes back babbling about impossibility of getting results due to Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. What's the explanation?"

Alex braced himself. He was beginning to understand Brassard's mind. It was worthy of a Hoka, except for lacking the Hoka *joie de vivre*. "The fellow should have known better," he said between his teeth. "I warned him."

"But what happened?"

"What would you expect? Here you had a Hoka tribe whose first exposure to human culture was a xenologist. You know how they go overboard for anything new. They started asking *him* questions about tribal customs and sex practices. They followed him around and took notes. They decided his watch was an ancestral totem and — Oh, never mind. Now they're making nuisances of themselves all over the planet. Will you listen to me for a change?"

Rapidly, Alex outlined the situation.

Brassard drummed impatiently on the desk top. "Well," he asked when the younger man had run down, "what d'you want, hey?"

"Your help, of course! We've got to go rescue my wife!"

"Sorry. Inspector not permitted to use force on any natives unless directly threatened. Colonial Office Regulations, Vol. XXXVIII, Sec. 12, Par. 3-b."

"Then I'll go!" screamed Alex. "I'll go rescue her myself!"

Brassard pressed the buzzer. "Rescue?" he barked. "What d'you mean, rescue? No charging in there with modern weapons and decimating the natives, Jones."

"B-b-but they won't give her up otherwise!"

"Then we'll send a commission. Yes, commission. That's what we'll send. Have one out there in a month. Two months at the latest. Long as I'm inspector in charge of this region there'll be no exposing of Class W planets to any weapons above Class 6."

A couple of Brassard's men appeared in the doorway in response to the buzzer. "Not sure I trust you, Jones," said the bureaucrat. "Have to sequestrate your sidearms. Better remove secondary-drive units from your boats too, so you can't

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go outsystem for mercenary soldiers."

"But those vitamin deficiencies!" pleaded Alex. "In two months she'll have scurvy and — and weigh three hundred kilos —"

"Sorry," said Brassard. "Earthman's burden. I'm not unreasonable, though. Go to Telko yourself if you like and see what you can do. I'll push hard for commission to negotiate if you fail."

Alex wavered, rebellion hot within him. But there were two strong marines in the doorway. Also — In his mind's eye he saw a picture of his lovely wife, captive, sadly stuffing herself and putting on weight. But right beside it his mind's eyes placing another vision of Tanni growing thin and wan on his meager ensign's pension, which was all he would have if he got himself broken from his present job.

Maybe he should rely on the government after all. But if the commission failed, Tanni was doomed . . . assuming she hadn't already gone out of her head from watching herself balloon and done something desperate. No!

Class 6 weapons — Wait, simple gunpowder was Class 5, wasn't it? He could round up some Hokas to help. The cowboys of the Western plains? No, it would take weeks to gather enough of them . . . *Hey!*

Very formally, Alexander Jones applied in triplicate for permission to attempt a rescue with Tokan auxiliaries. Equally formally, Jorkins Brassard stamped his OK. Then the plenipotentiary went out to the spacefield, where a sympathetic but rule-bound marine turned his emasculated courier boat over to him and watched it dwindle eastward in the sky.

Alex had not specified what auxiliaries he would use.

Toka had one desert. Once outworld traders had discovered what a market there was here for second-rate historical novels, it was inevitable that this desert would be populated by Arabs and the French Foreign Legion.

Alex landed outside Sidi Bel Abbes, a cluster of flat-roofed mud huts in an oasis. A kilometer or so beyond it lay the main Legion outpost, the Tricolor drooping over its walls. Everywhere else was rock and sand, glimmering under a brilliant sun.

A few portly figures in kaftan and burnoose watched him as he hurried through the streets. Once he collided with one of the brontosaurian beasts locally supposed to be a camel. He was rather dazed, both by the crisis and by the hypno he had taken en route — all available information on Telko. A knowledge of its dialects swirled through his head, mixed with technical dissertations on the biochemistry and its rapid action (that must be why Tanni was getting fat so fast) and a recording of a bloodthirsty folk song.

Arriving at the civil governor's

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mansion, he was led at once to that worthy. It was cool and dim in the office, but the Hoka stuck firmly by his sun helmet. He had also glued spiked mustaches and a goatee to his face.

"*Ah, M'sieur l'Ambassadeur!*" he cried, rising with a sweeping gesture that knocked a vase off his desk. "*Quel honneur! Bienvenu!*"

"*Hoog whah hogoo* —" panted Alex. "Damn! I mean, how do you do. Look, M. LaFontanelle, I've got troubles."

"*Tiens!*" The governor waved his arm nonchalantly and upset a floor lamp. "Something has occurred, then?" Like nearly all Hokas, he spoke good English, but as a Frenchman considered it his duty to throw in an accent.

"My wife —" began Alex, and stopped. The fewer beings told about Tanni's humiliating plight, the better; it would be enough to raise the Legion.

"Ah," said the governor, drawing a sharp breath. "Your lady?"

"She — er — well, I guess I better not talk about it," stumbled Alex.

"But of course!" cried LaFontanelle, raising his hands in horror. "My poor friend! It is *la Légion Étrangère* you wish, *hein?*"

Startled at such prescience, Alex could only nod. "Come with me," said the governor, laying a furry hand about his. There were tears in the black button eyes. Dazedly, Alex permitted himself to be led out toward the fortress.

He had been here before, to make sure that the Legion and the Arab Hokas were not killing each other. They weren't; there was no grudge between them, in fact a brisk trade, though they felt obliged to exchange occasional shots. But the Arabs preferred to skulk behind sand dunes and be highlighted against the setting sun on camelback, while the French — true to the tradition of Legionnaire marksmanship — never fired at less than 500 meters; and their black powder rifles, though producing the loud report and heavy smoke prized by Hokas, had an extreme range of about half that.

Guards in blue tunic, white breeches, red sash and kepis presented arms as the governor and the plenipotentiary hurried in through the gates. Beyond lay a dusty courtyard littered with adobe buildings. Toward the largest of these Alex was conducted, and found himself standing before the desk of the elderly commandant. "Here you are, *mon vieux*," said LaFontanelle.

"*Qu'est-que-c'est-que-ça?*" rattled the commandant.

"*La femme* —" said the governor.

"*Non!*" The officer's jaw dropped.

"*Mais oui.*"

"*Avec un autre — un plus jeune —?*"

"*On ne le dit pas; cependant . . .*" said the governor, nodding knowingly. The other Hoka nodded also and took out a printed form.

"Brassard!" muttered Alex between clenched jaws.

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"*Ah! Brassard son nom-de-guerre.*" The commandant wrote it down. "If you will sign here —" Alex scribbled his name without stopping to think. The commandant beamed, leaned across the desk, and shook the man's hand. "Congratulations, *mon brave*," he burbled. "You are now a Legionnaire. Report to Sergeant LeBrute."

"What?" yelped Alex, coming out of his daze. "What did you say?"

The commandant rubbed his hands and smiled in a fatherly fashion. "You are joining the French Foreign Legion to forget."

"What do you mean?" shouted Alex. "I can't join the French Foreign Legion! I'm the League plenipotentiary!"

"He tests us," nodded the governor to the commandant. "Ah, my friend, one knows how to preserve a secret. One understands you wish to forget. Ah, the frailty of woman." He sighed. "A word, a glance, and their heart is turned. No, Private Brassard, your secret is safe with me."

"And with *la Légion*," said the Hoka behind the desk. "Fear not, Private Brassard. What you were before entering is a secret that you may bury with you. The Legion asks no questions. The Legion will release you to no one." He turned his head. "Sergeant LeBrute!"

The door opened and a burly little Hoka came in.

"Wait!" cried Alex desperately, the sudden awful realization sweeping over him that he had slipped into another of those situations that beset his path on Toka like pools of quicksand. "You can't do this to me! I tell you, I belong to Earth!"

"Once, perhaps," replied the commandant. "Now you belong to La Belle France. It matters not what you were before joining. . . . Another *blue*, Sergeant LeBrute. Take it out."

"*Cochon!*" bawled the sergeant, trying hard to get a sadistic rasp into his squeaky voice. "*Nom d'un chameau!* Come along now!" Hokas being strong out of all proportion to their size, he clamped hold of Alex's collar and dragged him out as the human kicked and struggled and screamed for justice.

The governor twirled his mustache and wiped a tear from his eye.

"Ah," he said. "How well he pretends. *Un brave*. But underneath, his heart is breaking for the wife who has deceived him."

"*Naturellement*," replied the commandant.

They got a bottle marked *Chablis*, poured, and raised glasses solemnly.

"Remain there, *bleu misérable!*" said Sergeant LeBrute, tossing Alex onto a hard cot and stamping out.

The man sat up and looked around. He was in some kind of barracks, with several Legionnaires sitting about. None of them looked very surprised; they must get some odd types here, even for this planet.

"Bit of a brute, that Sergeant LeBrute," observed an Oxford ac-

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cent. Alex turned to see an aristocratic-mannered Hoka on the adjoining cot, who continued: "Allow me to introduce myself. Cecil Fotheringay-Phipp Alewyn Smith. You'll find the Legion isn't such a bad spot, old man. Of course, they march you till you drop, the food is terrible, the Arabs torture you to death if they catch you, the officers and noncoms are sadistic beasts, and you associate with the scum of the earth — but on the whole it's not a bad life."

"Oh?" said Alex feebly. He knew from his survey that it was mostly just talk: Hokas who had read P. C. Wren thought it was expected of them but were much too kindly to put it into practice. Still, soldiering here could be rugged, and there was Tanni —

"No, indeed," went on the Englishman. "Our platoon, for example, is fairly representative. Right next to you on the other side is Rastignon, whom we playfully call the Murderer."

Alex jumped and became aware of the other Hoka, sitting and sharpening his bayonet on a whetstone. "I am too!" he squeaked, and by the usual native courtesy his whopper was taken at face value.

"Next to him," went on Smith, "is LeRat, a scum of the Paris sewers type. Next to him is Alf Sniggs, a scum of the London sewers type. That mysterious fella playing with ink and paper at the table is Le Forgeur. Beyond him, that enormously strong and brutal-looking chap is Giuseppe Fortissimo." To the untrained eye, he was indistinguishable from the other round-bellied ursinoids. "Over in the corner —"

The Hoka he was pointing out looked up and suddenly broke into song. "My name is John Wellington Wells, I'm a dealer in magic and spells —"

"Mad, poor fellow," sighed Smith. "We call him Les Ciseaux, or in English, The Scissors. That sullen chap beside him is Kurt Wilhelm Schwartzmann von und zu Griffentaffel, a typical Prussian beast. At least, he would be typical if he weren't the only one on this planet."

The Legionnaire in question leaped on his feet, clicked his heels, and shouted: "*Achtung!*" He wore the standard uniform, but had added a monocle.

Alex shook his head, dazedly. "How does a Prussian beast get into the French Foreign Legion?" he asked in a numb voice.

"*Ach!*" sighed von und zu Griffentaffel. "It vas *schrecklich*. I had read about Bismarck, *verstehen Sie?* I vanted to machen all der odder *deutsche* Hokas into ein *Landswehr*. Nobody listened." He took off his monocle to let a tear fall from his eye. "Vot good iss it to be ein Prussian beast mit spiked helmet und all, ven effery time I shouten '*Achtung!*' efferybody else chust clinken der beer steins und singen '*In München steht ein Hofbräuhaus*'? I am ein failure." He collapsed into tears.

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Alex sighed and got back to his own troubles. "Look here, Smith," he said, "my wife —"

"Tut, tut, old chap," interrupted the Hoka. "No need to tell your story. In the Legion, one doesn't ask. A code of sorts, don't y' know."

"But you don't understand! My wife —"

"Of course, of course," said Smith. "A word is sufficient. Wives. Women. The ladies. Gentlemen, the Queen!" He stood up suddenly, raised his hand as if to propose a toast, caught himself, and sat down. "What am I doing?" he asked shakily. "Excuse me, old boy. You arouse old memories."

Alex slumped. He was getting nowhere.

That evening he was issued a uniform and told by Sergeant LeBrute, with many oaths, to put it on. Since it was meant for a Hoka, and Alex was rather tall and lanky even for a human, the effect can be imagined. He spent an unhappy night, and the next morning — after breakfast, which was coffee and French bread — his platoon was called out at a gruesome hour for a work detail.

He gulped when he saw what it was. His sleek courier boat was now the property of the Legion, and had been hauled into the fortress grounds. Nobody knew how to fly it, or cared. But the commandant was interested in its temperature-regulating coils.

It seemed that Sidi Bel Abbes did a lively trade in beer with the Arabs. These had heard vaguely that Bedouins don't drink, and abstained from the 180-proof rotgut the French Hokas fondly believed was wine. But no Hoka could imagine life without alcohol, so they settled for homebrew beer. The commandant decided to use the boat's coils in fermenting this mixture. Great vats of it were installed, and hundreds of bottles put in the hold for later use.

"*Bleus misérables!* Idler! *Cochon! Chameau! Vache! Hommard!*" Sergeant LeBrute scurried up and down, shouting curses at the platoon. Now and then he kicked them. This did not hurt a well-padded Hoka, but Alex was built differently. In any event, a man does not enjoy turning his own spaceboat into a brewery. He spent a seething day and returned exhausted to his barracks at the end of it.

As darkness fell, he lay on his cot and brooded. This was ridiculous. And poor Tanni! But how the devil was he going to get out of it?

His eyes wandered about the lantern-lit room, where the Legionnaires sat telling enormous lies about the heat and thirst they had suffered in the desert and the girls in the Casbah. He could get no help from them; they were enjoying their roles too much. . . . No — wait! An idea struck him.

He hurried over to the table, where Le Forgeur was copying a fifty-franc note with considerable skill. "Er — pardon me," he said.

" 'Allo," said the Hoka amiably.

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"Er — look — you couldn't possibly whip me up a discharge from the Legion, could you?"

"A discharge?" echoed Le Forgeur, looking up in astonishment. "*Mais, mon ami*, there are no discharges in the Legion. One deserts."

"One does?"

"*Exactement.* And if one is caught, one is sent to the penal battalion."

"Ulp!" said Alex.

Le Forgeur got up, alight with the quick heady enthusiasm of his race. "Is it that you intend perhaps to desert?" he cried. "*Alors*, I will accompany you."

"Huh?" said Alex. "You?"

A friendly hand fell on his arm. "If you're going to desert, old man," said Smith, "you need the help of an old hand who knows the desert. I'll come too. No, no thanks. I insist."

"*Ach*, to see Alt Heidelberg again!" said von und zu Griffentaffel. "I vill come mit."

"*Buono! Bravo!*" shouted Giuseppe Fortissimo. "Napoli! Vesuvio! Ice cream! La Scala!" And he broke into opera at the top of his lungs: "*Sì, fuggiam da queste mura . . .* !"

"Oh, *no!*" moaned Alex as they all crowded around him.

"This way," whispered Alex.

He led the file of Hokas toward the shadowy form of his courier boat.

"Quiet, now," he cautioned, opening the airlock.

"*Bleus misérables!*" shrilled a voice, splitting the night, and the rotund figure of Sergeant LeBrute popped up to confront him. "Aha! *Deserting!*"

Alex swallowed his heart and thought fast.

"No, no, mon . . . er . . . sergeant," he said. "Secret mission — I mean, patrol. Yes, that's it. We're a patrol — out to get *lost!*"

"A lost patrol!" cried LeBrute. Even in the dark, Alex could see his eyes shine with sudden excitement. "Ah, *mes enfants*, you will need Sergeant LeBrute to guide you."

"B-but —" stammered Alex.

"*Silence! C'est un fait accompli.* I, Sergeant LeBrute, am now in command. *En avant, marche!*"

"Into the boat," supplemented Alex hurriedly.

"Into the *bâteau*," agreed the noncom.

One by one, they crowded in.

Well . . . he had got his auxiliaries, though not precisely in the way he had planned. Alex set the autopilot for Telko and ran spaceward at full acceleration. The Hokas were too preoccupied with staring out at the stars and speculating on their mission to give much trouble. Alex had a chance to review his hypnotically acquired knowledge.

The trouble was, the northern peninsula on which Tanni had crashed was completely unknown. Cut off from the rest of the continent by a rugged mountain range, it had developed its own cultures, whatever they might be; all you could be sure of was (a) the lan-

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guage; (b) the technology, primitive iron-working and agriculture; and (c) a state of continuous warfare.

Well, he'd have to play by ear. The platoon had its rifles, such as they were. And his anachronistic charges had recently led Alex to develop skill with sword, bow and lance, if it came to that.

He called to mind the Telk physiognomy. An average male was a bit taller than a Hoka and even broader, one mass of muscle under a green skin, nude except for assorted cutlery. He had four powerful arms, and his stocky bowlegs ended in prehensile-toed feet which could serve as hands. The head was round, hairless, bat-eared, with small yellow eyes protected by bony ridges, mouth and nose contained in a porcine snout. Formidable characters, but —

At top acceleration, with gravitic fields to protect against pressure, the boat reached Telko in a few hours. Alex dove beneath the cloud layer, to find himself under a gloomy sky and over a sullen tideless ocean. When he located the single continent, he followed its jungled shores to the peninsula, and there he picked up Tanni's broadcast signal and homed on it.

The peninsula was a stony waste, thinly covered with scrub brush and tilled fields. The mountains ran out into steep hills. At their foot, Alex saw a flash of metal and swooped low. Yes . . . the flitter stood there, its drive-cones smashed. It was inside the thick earth walls of a village, whose rounded huts resembled igloos more than anything else. There was no sign of life, but he thought it best not to land within the settlement at once. He might get shot full of arrows.

Casting about, he saw a large ruined structure some two kilometers south, on a hilltop — a similar village, but wrecked and deserted in some war or other. It would do for a base. He set the boat down behind its walls and cut the engines.

The lost patrol poured out with glad cries. They were in a courtyard overgrown with native plants, mostly tubers. A warm dry wind blew upon them, and the eternal clouds lay moodily overhead. It looked like a good situation. Alex was somewhat startled, therefore, when he emerged to see Sergeant LeBrute prowling about with a worried expression. The platoon was posted on the wall facing the other village, rifles ready.

"What's wrong?" asked the human.

The sergeant spat. "Name of a name of a name of a name of a — uh —"

"Name?" suggested Alex.

"*Merci*. Name!" finished the sergeant. "But we will never from here emerge alive, *bleu*."

Alex did a double take. This was no attitude to find in those he expected to overcome the Telks.

"Nonsense!" he replied. "Why, we'll walk right out of here —"

"*Bleu misérable!*" stormed Le-

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Brute. "Do you contradict me? This is Zinderneuf — the fort which perishes to the last man!"

"But — but —"

"*Silence, cochon!*" LeBrute turned away. "Rastignon, Sniggs, you are detailed to the kitchen. Prepare these plants for eating."

"Wait —" screeched Alex, remembering Tanni's experience and seeing the Hokas and himself, grossly overweight, rolling around on the earth like helpless basketballs. "The . . . the Arabs have poisoned the fort's food supply. Use the stores in the boat."

He sighed with relief when the sergeant conceded this point, and went back himself to try calling Tanni. Somewhat to his surprise, the communicator responded and her distracted face looked out at him. He noticed that it had grown fuller.

"Alex!" she gasped. "Where are you?"

"I'm here," said Alex. "I mean, I'm on Telko. I just landed in this old ruin up on the hill. I've got some Legionnaires with me — But how are you?"

"I —" She choked back a sob. "I'm still eating."

"How much do you weigh now?"

"Don't ask me that!" she shrieked.

"Well . . . you're in the flitter again, I see."

"Yes. But — Alex, you came just at the right moment. The Telks won't let me go without fighting like devils. But they have a new war on now. The hill tribes are invading, and the village warriors are out fighting them. I've been left here in the flitter, nobody but the females to guard me. If you hurry —"

"I'll see," said Alex dubiously. "Sit tight, sweetheart."

He rushed outside, his brain humming.

"*Mes amis!*" he shouted. "Join me! We must hasten! The Arabs have got Cigarette, the daughter of the Legion, locked up over there. We've just time to rescue her!"

Hoka faces fell. But to Alex's dismay, not one of them moved.

"What are you waiting for?" he demanded. "Come on!"

"*Hélas!*" sobbed Sergeant LeBrute.

"*Hélas?*" asked Alex.

"*Oui, hélas,*" said Rastignon the murderer in a choked voice. "*La pauvre petite. Quel dommage* that one so young and beautiful should perish while *les soldats de la Légion* stand helplessly by."

"Helpless!" squeaked Alex.

"*Oui,*" said Sergeant LeBrute. "Helpless. Our duty is to defend this post to the last man. We may not abandon it. Cigarette is a child of the Legion. She will understand. She will die thinking of La Belle France and singing the Marseillaise."

"The hell she will!" snarled Alex, grabbing his rifle. "All right, I'll go alone."

"Halt!" ordered Sergeant LeBrute, aiming at him. "*Ne pas bouger.*"

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"What do you mean, *ne pas bouger?*" cried Alex. "I certainly won't *ne pas bouger*. I —"

"*Silence, bleu!*" bellowed LeBrute. "It is your duty to die like the rest of us on the walls of Zinderneuf. If you attempt a rescue of Cigarette, I will order the platoon to open fire on you."

"At less than 500 meters?" asked Alex.

LeBrute put his rifle down and scratched his head. Taking a perhaps unfair advantage of his confusion, the human made a dash for the wall.

But he had barely got one leg over it when a roar from the hills petrified him. Out of a nearby defile poured a good two thousand battling creatures. The village Telks were in grim retreat, and the hillmen after them. In moments, the fight had spilled across the plain and there was no hope of escaping Zinderneuf.

Alex goggled. He had never seen a combat like this. Not a sword or a spear in sight. The natives were fighting with — *Yipe!* — eggbeaters, scissors, tennis balls, pipes, spoons, and mousetraps!

After a while, the man began to understand.

The eggbeaters, a defensive weapon like the medieval pike, had sharp blades on the end of a three-meter shaft, turned by a crank. The scissors were shears, two meters long, for clipping off an enemy's head or hand. Only a four-armed Telk could have wielded such monstrosities. The mousetraps were oversized affairs, big enough to catch a bear, thrown in the path of an advancing army. The spoons were enormous ladles, dipped into pots of corrosive acid which was splattered at the foe. The rubber-like balls held needles which must be poisoned, and were sent bouncing into opposing ranks by Telks with carefully developed calluses on their hands. The pipes were of Gargantuan dimensions, smoked by certain warriors who blew great greasy clouds; a flaw of wind gave Alex a whiff and sent him from the wall coughing, weeping, and swearing. Their "tobacco" must be some noxious weed to which the pipemen had cultivated an immunity.

And he was supposed to rescue Tanni from this!

"They collide!" shouted Le Forgeur. "They come together with force of the extreme and slaughter indescribable!"

"Whoop!" said Alf Sniggs. "H'I sye, they ain't 'arf fightin', are they?"

"Buck up, old chap," advised Smith. "Remember the playing fields of Eton."

"Well," yelled Alex desperately, "come on, then!"

Smith gulped. "But this isn't the playing fields of Eton," he pointed out.

Helplessly, Alex watched the battle surge past his stronghold. There was another corps among the villagers, who now formed a rear-guard

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while the rest streamed inside their walls. These Telks spat something into their horny hands and spunged them at the foe — objects which even the raging hillmen avoided. One skittered over the ramparts of Zinderneuf, and Alex got a close look at it: a small metal disc with sharp edges that glistened with some poison.

He buried his face in his hands. "Oh, no," he groaned. "Oh, no, no, no. Not tiddlywinks!"

By littering the ground with these missiles, the villagers covered their retreat and got safely home. The great wooden gates slammed shut as the enemy poured up. Spoonmen made it discouraging to walk about under the walls, and the invaders withdrew sullenly, dragging their casualties along.

Carried away by enthusiasm, Smith hopped up and gave three cheers for the defenders; then, remembering his British sportsmanship, he politely added three cheers for the attackers.

They heard him. Snouted faces turned around, yellow eyes glistened balefully, a harsh war cry lifted — and as one, the barbarians charged at this new object.

"*Aux armes!*" yelled LeBrute gleefully. "*Formez vos bataillons! Marchons! Un pour tous et tous pour un!*"

Rifles cracked as the Telks swarmed close. Alex saw a number of direct hits. Only — they didn't do any damage! A punctured Telk was bowled over, but picked himself up and resumed his advance. That damned rapid biochemistry — blood clotted almost instantly — black powder rifles just weren't any good here!

For a moment, shears gleamed before him as a warrior mounted the wall. Then Giuseppe Fortissimo pushed him off. Doggedly, the Telk climbed up again, to be pushed off again. This might have gone on indefinitely, but the charge spent itself and the hillmen drew back, grumbling. They might not be seriously hurt by bullets, but the shock was painful.

For a moment, Telk and Hoka glared at each other. There was a hurried conference among the barbarian leaders, and one native was sent forward. He walked on his hands, with feet in the air and a scrap of cloth in his mouth.

LeBrute looked puzzled. "Name of an adequate little red wine," he muttered. "What is it he does, that one?"

"Parley, old bean," guessed Smith astutely. "Must be their idea of a flag of truce, don't y' know . . . shows he's completely disarmed."

"Ah, so!" Sergeant LeBrute sprang up on the wall. His round furry face looked down on the envoy, who stood upright.

"*Eh bien?*" snapped Sergeant LeBrute.

"*Hoog, whag, waag!*" said the Telk.

"*Qu'est-ce que vous dîtes?*"

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"*Waag ah hoog wha hoog.*"

"*Jamais! Nous sommes soldats de la Légion!*"

"*Wugh wugh wahaag!*"

"*Cochon! Nous n'avons pas peur. Nous ne savons pas ce que c'est que la peur!*"

"*Whog!*"

"*Vache!*"

"One has to give the devil his due," whispered Smith to Alex. "A sadistic oaf, our sergeant, but he has courage. I'll wager not many would have stood up to that Telk and told him off in just those words."

Alex climbed up beside the Hoka noncom. This was getting nowhere. He broke in, speaking Telkan, and LeBrute spat a final "*Chameau!*" and stood aside.

The conversation was brief and to the point. His Most Heathen Majesty, Illustrious King-Emperor of Whaa, Magnificent Duke of Hoog-Guggl, Incomparable Lord of the Marshy Marches, Warrior of the Order of the Wug, Protector of the Gods, Hereditary Headsnipper of the Tribes of Gung and Wuh, Earl of the High Whaag, Commander of the Skuggwah, the Very-Invincible-And-Much-To-Be-Feared-Whose Tread-Shakes-The-Earth-And Whose-Burps-Are-Thunder-In-The-Hills, Hooglah Hooglah Hooglah Gungwhoo Whog Hooglah XVII, offered alliance to the furbearing strangers against the impious village of Gundersnath, which had not only refused him his rightful tribute but had demanded tribute from *him*. In exchange for what petty but perhaps amusing assistance they might give, the furbearing strangers would get a small share of the loot. If they refused this generous offer of His Most Heathen Majesty, half of them would be hanged without mercy and the rest beheaded without reprieve. A reply was requested at their earliest convenience.

Alex, describing himself as Ambassador Plenipotentiary and Extraordinary of the Most Terrible And Carnivorous Empire Of Earth, accepted, on condition that he should have the hairless two-armed female held prisoner by the admittedly vile and unspeakable Gundersnathians. This was agreed, and the envoy walked off on his hands.

"*Bien,*" snapped Sergeant LeBrute. "What was said?"

Alex explained. "It's our only chance to get at that village," he added.

"*Non!*" cried the Hoka. "Have I not told you, we are here to defend this fortress *à l'outrance?*"

"Oh, but this is different," said Alex hastily. "We'll be making a sally."

"*Bleu misérable!*" screamed LeBrute. "Have you the impudence to give advice to your sergeant?"

"Yes," said Alex.

"Excellent!" said LeBrute. "What courage! I shall recommend you for decoration. Let us sally, therefore, at once." And he leaped off the wall and started toward the hillmen, crying, "*Marchons! Vive la France!*"

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The rest followed. Alex dashed back into the boat to call Tanni and give her the word. It would be slaughter if he tried to land directly; nor was a vessel this size maneuverable enough to be used as a weapon in itself, say to knock enemy soldiers off the walls. But if his allies could storm the village —

A rank smell assailed his nose. He heard a seething behind the after bulkhead. Flinging it open, he was horrified to see the vats of green beer foaming and boiling. The entire engine room was one vast mass of suds.

"Oh, no," whimpered Alex.

That Telkan biochemistry again. Airborne yeasts — ?

He tested the engines nervously, finding them unharmed behind their insulation. Despite her fears for him, Tanni was somewhat hurt at the briefness of her husband's message. But she did not have to speak from a cabin filled with the odor of 500 liters of sour beer.

Hooglah Hooglah Hooglah Gungwhoo Whog Hooglah XVII was not optimistic. He had tried another charge and seen it reel back from the walls of Gundersnath. The village was amply provisioned, but the hillmen had no supplies and could not live off this barren country. Anyhow, the fiery Telk temperament did not include the patience for a siege.

As night fell, the army camped around the settlement, their fires twinkling through the dense gloom, and sang defiant songs to drown out the jeers therefrom. Alex listened to one because it had a rather pleasant little melody.

"*Ha, carrion birds*
shall batten on them —
belly gashes,
guts and blood!
Eggbeaters howl;
heads shall roll;
the foe shall tread
on tiddlywinks!"

The king paced murkily before his own fire. Its red light shimmered off the scissors of his guards. A dozen assorted knives rattled at his waist. The Legionnaires sat nearby, smoking vicious cigarettes — that much was authentically French — and yarning about their desperate adventures in the trackless Sahara. Alex paced side by side with the king, even more worried than he. The effect was like a tall palm walking next to a stumpy cactus.

"Had we but some long-range weapon," grumbled the Telk. "'Tis their spoonmen and tiddlywinkers up on the walls which will not let us near enough to bash in the gates. Were I not the mightiest butcher the world has known, I'd give up and go kill somebody else. I may do it anyway."

Alex gulped. "Our rifles — " he suggested.

"Bah!" said the king. "'Tis a good idea, having weapons which shoot from afar, but yours only make a hole a cub would laugh at. It takes a

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broad cutting edge, see you, to lay those wights out."

Alex considered introducing the longbow. But no — It would take days to make enough, nor would a Telk submit to the intensive training required — nor did he and Tanni have that much time.

John Wellington Wells, alias Les Ciseaux, pushed back his kepi and said plaintively: "Ah, for some wine!"

"An excellent idea, *mon brave*," answered Sergeant LeBrute. "Rastignon, Sniggs, Fortissimo, fetch us the old and rare."

"Pardon, Sergeant," said Le Forgeur unhappily. "But there is no wine."

"*No wine!*"

The Legionnaires looked thunderstruck. Too late, Alex remembered that he had left Toka without a supply of the potent liquor which was so much a part of everyday Hoka life. Whether known as wine, redeye, rum, grog, uisgebeatha or Old Spaceman, it was always present in wholesale quantities. Now, for the first time, Alex found himself with a bunch who had it not.

"We are wineless!" sobbed Le Rat. "It is the end of the universe."

"No — wait —" Alex spoke hurriedly, before they should get completely demoralized. "We do have some beer on the boat, you know."

"*Bière?*" snorted LeBrute. His moist black nose wrinkled.

"It's better than nothing."

"*Ach, Bier!*" sighed von und zu Griffentaffel ecstatically. "*Alt Heidelberg! Ach, du lieber Augustine —*"

The other Hokas, shouting above his song, agreed with Alex and sent a party to get some flasks. When it arrived, King Hooglah snatched a bottle, sniffed it, sipped, and threw it away in disgust. "Not poisonous," he growled.

The bottle hit the ground and exploded, scattering shrapnel. Alex dove for the dirt. When he looked up, the Hokas were calmly gulping their own ration.

"It is of a nothing," said LeBrute reassuringly. "It is but that here the fermentation is so rapidly proceeding. Be of good courage, Private Brassard."

"*Brassard!*" Alex jumped up with blood in his eye. He had endured being railroaded into the Legion, making his boat a brewery, crossing space, fighting aliens . . . but to call him Brassard was beyond endurance. Snatching a bottle, he lifted it to break LeBrute's head.

Just in time, he stopped himself. Shaken, the flask jetted a stream of evil-smelling foam over his tunic. But —

"Your Majesty," he croaked. "Your Majesty!"

In the gray dawn of Telko, Hooglah's army attacked again.

It came in a solid wave, howling, brandishing its weapons. Pouring down the slope and across the plain, demoniac, their feet shaking the earth like the ponderous unstop-

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pable advance of the incoming tide, the hill warriors rushed at the defenders.

But in front of them was a line of special troops, to the number of a hundred. Each member held a tightly corked beer bottle in each of his upper hands, and had a bag full of them into which his lower hands could dip. And each wooden cork had a knife blade driven into it by the tang.

At the head of the assault charged King Hooglah with his guards. There too was the Foreign Legion — Alex could not hold them back, and something forbade him to linger in the rear when his Hokas were going to war.

Up on the walls, now, he could see the Gundersnath garrison. The wind was at his back, so there were no pipemen; but spoons waved ominously over bubbling pots, and tiddly winks were already bouncing to meet him.

Alex sweated and tried not to swallow his tongue. He had seen what those edges, whetted and venomous, could do. But beyond the enemy, he saw the metallic gleam of the flitter holding Tanni.

They were almost at the stronghold when Hooglah roared a battle cry and lifted his eggbeater in signal. Alex stole a glance behind him.

He saw the beermen shake their flasks, brace them against the upper shoulders, and take aim, all in one motion. He did not see the corks come out — those traveled nearly as fast as a rifle bullet — but he saw the silver jet of liquid and foam that arrowed from the mouths of the bottles and sprayed across the foe.

The knife blades whistled among the defenders. They did not make fatal wounds, but were enough to put a Telk *hors de combat* for a few hours. Spoonmen and tiddlywinkers dropped. Their line grew ragged.

"Once more into the breach, dear friends!" squeaked Smith.

"*Allons, enfants!*" cried LeBrute, popping away with his rifle. He ignored a gob of acid spattering within centimeters of him. Hokas did not lack courage. "*Aux armes! Marchons! Voilà!*"

"*Donnerwetter!*" cheered von und zu Griffentaffel. "*Vorwärts! Drang nach Osten!*" He broke into *Die Beiden Grenadiere*, in competition with Giuseppe Fortissimo, who was singing *Di quella pira*, complete with high C's.

Again the cosmos exploded. And again. And again. The beermen stood like machines, grabbing out bottles, shaking, aiming, firing, sweeping the walls clean. And meanwhile a hundred of their comrades were battering down the gates.

As the invaders swarmed through, Alex found himself whirled off with his Hokas. He glimpsed snatches of the fight, Telk against Telk with what they considered conventional weapons. In spite of all the activity, there were surprisingly few casualties. A fair number were hopping about scratching frantically with all

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four arms where the ladled acid had got to them, but they seemed too tough for serious damage. Near the flitter, a hill Telk with oversized shears was energetically trying to cut a village Telk in half. He was not succeeding, the victim's six flailing limbs knocking the blades aside as fast as they approached.

The excitement of the battle carried Alex away as he clubbed his rifle and led the Hokas toward the spaceboat.

"Sally on!" he cried.

"*Chargeons!*" agreed LeBrute, slamming a Telk into the air.

"And a left!" whooped Alex. "And a right! Let 'em have it! Yea, team! Brrrackety-ax, co-ax, co — oh, hello, dear. We've come to rescue you." He hung on the airlock of the flitter and gasped for breath.

"Alex!" cried Tanni, emerging. She had definitely put on weight, but not to any serious extent as yet. So far she had just achieved a look of pleasantly bouncy plumpness. Her tunic and skirt, however, were already strained to the bursting point and had begun to give at the seams in discreet places.

"Back, now!" said Alex. "Return to the boat!" He added quickly: "The lost patrol has accomplished its mission. Now we must get the secret papers back to headquarters."

The Hokas formed a square about
i and slugged their way to the
There they halted.

e fight was ending, more and more Gundersnath Telks standing on their hands and waving their feet in the air. But it was urgent to escape, lest King Hooglah turn on his allies.

Nevertheless, the ground for half a kilometer outside was strewn with tiddlywinks.

The Legionnaires milled nervously. "What are you waiting for?" bawled Alex. He was still half berserk.

"Out there, *mon vieux* —" LeBrute pointed.

"We have shoes on, what?" ventured Smith. "They may protect us. Then again, they may not. What say, eh, what, what, what?"

Alex swept Tanni into his arms and led a dash. His voice lifted in a howl:

"*Damn the tiddlywinks! Full speed ahead!*"

A bright and cheerful sun shone on the parade ground of the Foreign Legion at Sidi Bel Abbes, and on the troops drawn up in dress uniform. The Lost Patrol stood in front, Sergeant LeBrute almost bursting his buttons with pride. The entire platoon was being awarded the Croix de Guerre, and he had the Legion of Honor.

Jorkins Brassard hovered about, unhappy and embarrassed. He had enforced the regulations about wea
ons, but there were also regulatio
about needlessly exposing wards o
the League to danger. Alex bore no special grudge; still, with the inspector under his thumb, he could

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be sure of a glowing report to Earth Headquarters.

Near Tanni and her husband, the Hoka governor twirled his mustaches diffidently.

"How can Madame forgive me?" he asked. "For my . . . indelicate assumption, *c'est à dire*."

"You're forgiven," said Tanni graciously.

Alex ducked as a button did pop off LeBrute's tunic.

"I am so sorry," went on the governor. "*Naturellement*, one has torn up the enlistment papers —" He stammered in embarrassment.

"That's all right," said Alex, not to be undone.

"I would never have leaped to such an erroneous conclusion," said LaFontanelle, "but —"

"But what?" asked Tanni.

"Madame must understand," said the little Hoka. "It is only that I am so French."

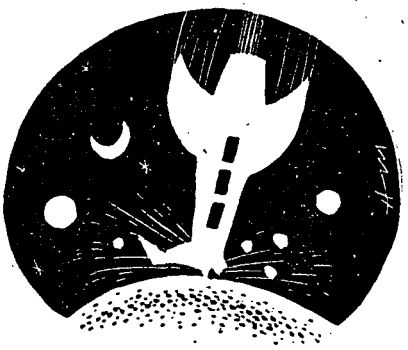
"*Monsieur l'Ambassadeur de la Terre Alexander Braithwaite Jones!*" said the commandant of the Legion formally.

Alex stepped forward with equal stiffness. The commandant adjusted his epaulettes, stood on tiptoe, and pinned the red rosette on the man's chest.

"*Mon brave!*" said the commandant.

He kissed Alex on both cheeks.

Humans and Hokas present were treated to the sight of the Cultural Development Plenipotentiary, representative and official arm of the United Republics of Earth, Luna, Venus, and Mars, which is the mightiest state within an Interbeing League that spans a hundred thousand suns, blushing like a schoolboy.



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Nellthu

Ailsa had been easily the homeliest and the least talented girl in the University, if also the most logical and levelheaded. Now, almost 25 years later, she was the most attractive woman Martin had ever seen and, to judge from their surroundings, by some lengths the richest.

". . . so lucky running into you again after all these years," she was saying, in that indescribably aphrodisiac voice. "You know about publishers, and you can advise me on this novel. I was getting so tired of the piano . . ."

Martin had heard her piano recordings and knew they were superb — as the vocal recordings had been before them and the non-representational paintings before *them* and the fashion designs and that astonishing paper on prime numbers. He also knew that the income from all these together could hardly have furnished the Silver Room in which they dined or the Gold Room in which he later read the novel (which was of course superb) or the room whose color he never noticed because he did not sleep alone (and the word *superb* is inadequate).

There was only one answer, and Martin was gratified to observe that the coffee-bringing servant cast no shadow in the morning sun. While Ailsa still slept (superbly), Martin said, "So you're a demon."

"Naturally, sir," the unshadowed servant said, his eyes adoringly upon the sleeper. "Nellthu, at your service."

"But such service! I can imagine Ailsa-that-was working out a good spell and even wishing logically. But I thought you fellows were limited in what you could grant."

"We are, sir. Three wishes."

"But she has wealth, beauty, youth, fame, a remarkable variety of talents — all on three wishes?"

"On one, sir. Oh, I foxed her prettily on the first two." Nellthu smiled reminiscently. " '*Beauty*' — but she didn't specify, and I made her the most beautiful centenarian in the world. '*Wealth beyond the dreams of avarice*' — and of course nothing is beyond such dreams, and nothing she got. Ah, I was in form that day, sir! But the third wish . . ."

"Don't tell me she tried the old '*For my third wish I want three more wishes*'! I thought that was illegal."

"It is, sir. The paradoxes involved go beyond even our powers. No, sir," said Nellthu, with a sort of rueful admiration, "her third wish was stronger than that. She said: '*I wish that you fall permanently and unselfishly in love with me.*' "

"She was always logical," Martin admitted. "So for your own sake you had to make her beautiful and . . . adept, and since then you have been compelled to gratify her every —" He broke off and looked from the bed to the demon. "How lucky for me that she included *unselfishly!*"

"Yes, sir," said Nellthu.

ANTHONY BOUCHER

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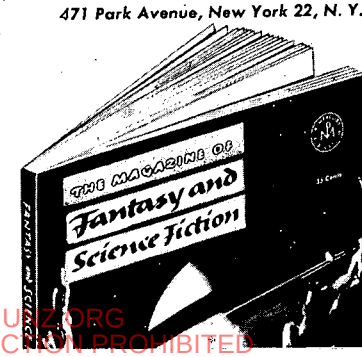

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